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Melville's Captain Ahab as the Gothic Hero: Origins and Iterations of the Paradigm in American Literature and Culture

(Smjer: Američka književnost i kultura- dvopredmetni A studij)

Kandidat: Filip Cesar
Mentor: dr. sc. Stipe Grgas, red. prof.
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Introduction

Unusual short stories, pervading ambiguity, both in moral terms and in terms of the plot, a sense of uneasiness, stubborn inconclusiveness, significance of the family and other nuclei of social existence and their perversion through both subtle and overt subversion of social norms; role reversal, refusal of the past to stay in the past and it always cropping up like a specter in this haunted mansion of life, be it in the private or communal sphere, paired with the ever-present and elusive notion of the uncanny- this was my initial gateway into the world of Gothic fiction, and more-or-less the sum total of my knowledge on the genre when I started thinking about trying a Gothic reading/analysis of *Moby Dick*, more than two years after taking the first introductory course on the subject. But what is the Gothic? Is it a genre, a literary movement almost of its own, or is it a spin-off, a surprisingly self-sufficient and time-resistant overgrowth sprouted from the back of Romanticism? More importantly, which novels, which short stories and other cultural products can be read as belonging to a degree to this realm of fiction? The idea that *Moby Dick* may be read as a Gothic novel seemed self-evident to me, having previously explored Gothic topics and imagery on the example of Melville's short story, *Benito Cereno*. The move to expand such a reading and apply it to a more expansive work of fiction by the same author seemed natural. Of course, due to the ambition and the scope of the novel, other readings are not only possible, but often preferred, which leaves the Gothic aspect overlooked. This problem left me with considerable doubts as to the feasibility of the project. However, after browsing through a number of critical texts dealing with the subject, it became obvious that a Gothic reading of *Moby Dick* may be most easily justifiable when its focus lies with Captain Ahab as the archetypal Gothic villain-hero or hero-villain. We can argue that the reason for this follows the same logic and train of thought as the readings of *Frankenstein* which focus on the blasphemous attempt by Victor Frankenstein to play God; furthermore, why most great works of fiction can be explored and dissected by observing its protagonists, and we need not look far and wide to find examples of that: *Don Quixote*, *Hamlet*, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, *Madame Bovary*, *Lolita* to cite just some of the more famous ones. At the time of gathering material for this thesis, I was

doing an unrelated research on *Paradise Lost* and whether Milton himself is "of the Devil's party", as Blake famously put it. This very centrality, the appeal of central protagonists in works of literature is in many cases even more pronounced in Gothic fiction; the very fact that a character can be so morally ambiguous and so destructive as is often the case, paired with a natural appeal given to him by his position in the text and the often tragic and immutable fate that stems from his unyielding nature, makes for the most powerful impressions with the readers.

As a consequence of all this, the several key questions this thesis will attempt to answer are the following: What makes *Moby Dick* a Gothic novel? What is the role of Ahab as the hero within the text? Is there anything specific about the anti-hero or the villain-hero when it comes to Gothic fiction? Is the anti-hero the typical Gothic hero and what conclusions can we draw from that?

We will explore these and other questions, based on the premise that Ahab is indeed an exemplary Gothic villain-hero, and analyze the sources of this paradigm in the peculiar social circumstances of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as predominant literary movements, primarily Romanticism, and the works of authors such as Byron, Milton, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Homer, etc. The significance of this type of hero for a certain strain of Gothic literature will be further explored, as well as its special meanings and developments within the context of American literary and cultural tradition. Before we get to that, however, due to the scope and complexity of the topic, as well as to substantiate the arguments, a large portion of the thesis will be dedicated to textual analysis. The first part of this, as a preliminary introduction to the main topic, will be an elaborate defense of the possibility of reading Melville as a Gothic author, focused on one of possible Gothic interpretations of his novella *Benito Cereno.* After that, our analytical eye will turn to *Moby Dick* in order to explore the Gothic elements within the novel. Only then will the last chapter, while deriving ideas from a broad and diverse range of sources, provide a certain synthesis of the basic concepts, as well as draw comparisons to other possible readings and critical perspectives.

The unfortunate nature of dealing with such a well-known and thoroughly studied text as *Moby Dick*, as well as with such a contested and controversial genre/mode as the Gothic, dictates that certain readers may find some of the arguments presented here blatantly obvious and not altogether new, while others may see them as misguided or simply wrong. I do not presume to uncover some great truths. Still, as a critical reader of *Moby Dick*, sometimes I

approach it as a ‘wide-eyed young Platonist’ on top of the mainmast, and sometimes the effort resembles much more closely the business of squeezing lumps of sperm back into liquid using bare hands. To misappropriate Ishmael’s words, “Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me” (Melville 322) So here’s hoping that even though I may have inadvertently squeezed a few hands or cut off a few toes, the oil produced will yet light a few lamps and touch upon a few relevant topics instead of sinking in pursuit of an elusive, untenable phantom argument.

1. *Benito Cereno:* A Case for a Gothic Reading of Melville's Work[1]

Is Melville a Gothic writer? Or rather, can Melville's works be read as Gothic or with the Gothic in mind? By reading many of the anthologies and critical overviews of the genre, one must conclude that authors are generally reluctant to make that claim. While he is undoubtedly always at the fringes of the Gothic and always makes his way into the footnotes and is used when works are compared and enumerated, the general consensus seems to be that he does not belong to what can be considered the core of the genre, or at least does not feature among its indispensable names. In her overview of Gothic literature, Carol Margaret Davison warns against listing *Moby Dick* among Gothic works, arguing that "Coherently defining and theorizing the Gothic in its early classical phase is key to a critically responsible and rewarding discussion" (15) as well as lamenting that it has become a "catch-all category" (16) and that, "on the heels of decades of scholarship devoted to establishing the literary Gothic as a legitimate domain of study, the present-day popularity and rampant, unqualified and broad-based application of this category now threatens, in some cases, to de-legitimize it." (ibid.) Despite all that, there are two works by Herman Melville which are often read as Gothic without many second-thoughts- *Pierre*, the novel that followed after *Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno*, a novella from *The Piazza Tales* (these two works are explored both by Charles Crow and Allan Lloyd Smith in their respective overviews of the genre). To 'break the ice' in a way and open up a new approach to *Moby Dick*, in this chapter I offer a Gothic reading of the novella as a sort of precursor to the more encompassing themes yet to follow. The choice of *Benito Cereno* is peculiar since it can be read in a different key, primarily as a captivity narrative.

The captivity narrative, in a nutshell, is a story about a man or a woman with a western (American) set of values who finds him/herself imprisoned by a group of people who are considered primitive by his/her culture. It is perhaps most often associated with the stories of American settlers who have been captured by the 'savage' Native Americans. One exemplary story that fits this description was written down by Cotton Mather, *A Notable Exploit: The Story of Hannah Dunstan*. However, captivity narratives are also the stories of Christian slaves who have been held in North Africa, primarily by the Berber pirates. As such, the

[1] This chapter was adapted from a conference paper titled "Melville and the Captivity Narrative", presented at the 'Melville and Americanness' conference at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK, on June 29th, 2012.

captivity narrative has developed over the years and it has been adapted to serve multiple social functions.

There are several points which I will try to support. First, that there are two different instances in the development of the captivity narrative and that Melville fits into neither of those and has a special, ambivalent place in the development of the genre. The first stage is the simple story where the white man is the victim and the hero, while the Indians are savages and antagonists. It is illustrated by such works as the story of Hannah Dunstan by Mather and the older, European stories, one of which is found in *Robinson Crusoe*. In the second stage, the white man is assimilated and takes the point of view of the Indians. It creates the illusion of being fair and doing justice to the 'other', but it is condescending, since it always requires a white man to argue for the Indians. They cannot speak for themselves or the intended audience cannot hear them, so they need a mediary, somebody the audience can relate to and care about. This was very popular in some westerns and still exists in such films as *Pathfinder, Avatar* and *The Last Samurai*.

The role of the early captivity narrative was to strengthen the community. The dominant group constitutes itself and its identity by contrasting its set of values against the values of a very different culture. By switching the roles of the tyrant and the victim, certain actions are justified. The idea behind it is to show that the enemy has power, that the enemy thus really is the enemy and a threat. The solution of the relations between the dominant force and the minority force is extermination. The captors / savages are not seen as human beings, but rather like a threat that needs to be resolved.

In later instances, a belief arises that reconciliation is maybe possible after all. This is achieved since guilt is removed from the whole of society to a small number of irresponsible/greedy individuals.

When talking about *Benito Cereno*, the idea of a captivity narrative does not naturally spring to mind, among other reasons because the captivity narrative is strongly associated with Native Americans. The problem also lies in the fact that Melville creates a vivid and diverse mix of genres that is hard to disentangle. *Benito Cereno* could also be described as a Gothic tale. The steady building of suspension and the air of mystery are used to keep the readers interested. The weather and the descriptions evoke the idea of ghost ships coming through the mist. It is laden with symbolism, with many casual references on the first pages reflecting various points in the plot and character development later on. By using Melville's own words,

we can say that these motives that hint at something in the future are “Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.” (37)

The Gothic part of the story deals with the crucial and frightening issue of trust, while the captivity narrative part deals with the issue of power. The betrayal of trust and the fear that we may be putting our trust in the wrong person is at the root of the Gothic. Can we trust those who surround us, can we trust our wives or husbands, can we ultimately trust ourselves and our senses? Can we trust society? What is hidden from us? What is not being told? What if we are placing our trust in the wrong person? Delano is completely fooled by Babo and believes that he is not only faithful, but extremely and sincerely devoted. The disparity between the expectations and the truth only makes the revelation in the end more frightening.

When it comes to power, Babo’s power stems from the fact that the whites have prejudices and preconceived notions about him that are essentially false.

Eric Sundquist talks about *Benito Cereno* as a masquerade. His point is supported by the stern-piece described on the early pages of the book, where a dark satyr is standing on the neck of a writhing figure. Both of them are masked. Furthermore, the satyr really does symbolize trickery and mischievous behavior. Sundquist further argues that, in *Benito Cereno,* Melville “caricatured the northern romantic view… that masters were dissipated aristocrats and their slaves docile, imitative (but brutalized) creatures” (187) Unlike bronze-cast and regal Ahab, himself a source of Gothic apprehension, the captain of San Dominick is the one ultimately revealed as docile and imitative, while romantic defiance and a strange power over men is revealed in Babo, a slave.

The other slaves, primarily the six hatchet polishers, whose role is unknown throughout most of the novella, are described using words such as ‘barbarous’, saying that they had the “raw aspect of unsophisticated Africans” (41). The captivity narrative deals precisely with that, with nature and civilization, with what it means to be cultured and where the limits of barbaric behavior are. The captors in captivity narratives are necessarily savage. Here, however, it is much more complicated. We have Babo, who is cunning and who knows the rules and customs of civilization very well, but subverts them, uses them in his own way and in his own favor.

In a complex spin on the typical Gothic doubling, the roles of the captor and the captive are also being switched upside down and passed between multiple characters, creating a complicated and entangled whole. The order of things is upset so that all three of the main characters are both captors and captives in their own ways. Benito and Babo fit into different roles at different times. Benito starts out as a captor at the beginning, and a rebellion makes

Babo the captor and Benito the captive. From the perspective of Babo, he is a captive who needs to do anything in his power to be free. Just like Hannah Dunstan, he kills his captors, not feeling that a peaceful solution is possible. Again, just like Hannah Dunstan, he did small favors for his captors to gain their trust, while prejudices stopped the slaveholders from seeing clearly. At the same time when narratives of white people tricking and outsmarting their captors were very popular, those same white people expected no such cunning from those whom they themselves kept in subjugation.

Amasa Delano is the captor in that he epitomizes the American character and, through his agency, the order in which Babo is enslaved is re-established. However, while he is aboard the San Dominick, he is also a captive himself, although he does not realize it. Every move he makes could cause his immediate death, so he is held captive by Babo's good will and by his own actions and deeds. In a way, his freedom is restricted, but only his naiveté and good humor stop anything from happening. There is also a feeling he has that his life really is in danger, but his intuition is misguided.

It may seem unusual to place a captivity narrative on a ship. Most of the captivity narratives take place in the wilderness. There is, however, a reason for this choice. The ship as a whole is a unit with its own laws and customs. Much like a country, it is self-contained and it has its own government in the form of the captain. Melville in pretty obvious terms comments on the problem of slavery by using this metaphor. The relationship between Benito and Babo is unhealthy, since Benito is living in constant fear. After the Haiti revolution, as we can read from Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia,* there was a real concern about the slaves and what they may be capable of. Jefferson even made plans to transport all the freed slaves back to Africa, his reasoning being that "Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the other race." (264) The constant stalemate, argues Jefferson, where one group is constantly oppressed and subjugated, could end up having catastrophic consequences. Well-meaning though he may be (and we can draw a parallel here with Amasa Delano), not even Jefferson is free of these prejudices. For the white man living in that time, African Americans truly represented a lower form of existence, resulting in incomprehension and fear. It is shocking how Jefferson describes the otherness of the black man, as not only superficially, but biologically, almost ontologically different. The haunting facelessness that Melville ironically reserved for the color white (as we will explore further in the following chapter) is here

reserved for the dark skin of the slaves, masking the emotions and schemes that may be crawling underneath: “Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race?” (265) Note the use of the phrase ‘*other* race’. In this situation, there can be no reconciliation. A murderous mind lies beneath the mask of a loving servant. This mind is bent on revenge; it can no longer be appeased.

Unlike Jefferson, however, *Benito Cereno* is not biased, at least not in any immediate way. In ‘Benito Cereno’, the idea is not to show the ‘other’ as savage and to justify Christian morals. The novella raises a serious question: What if? What if the tables were turned? For the oppressed, there is no open warfare, no such thing as direct assault. What is needed is subversion, silent, stealthy murders in the night and constantly wearing a mask. That is why they are defeated by Delano’s men. In this way, we ultimately see who the captor is at the highest level. It is Amasa Delano, and, by extension, America. An interesting point to make here is the fact that Delano is not a negative character. In fact, he is singularly good-natured. This simply reflects the paradoxes of the American nation, a nation with a claim to radical innocence, but willing to commit atrocious acts against other human beings.

In its purest form, the captivity narrative tells a story about a settler (Christian) taken by the natives. In every instance, we deal with a stranger (stranger to the natives, but not a stranger to us) infiltrating the native society. Here, that position cannot be filled by neither Babo nor by Benito. Delano is indeed closest to the typical captivity narrative hero since he is the only one the implied readers can relate to. Of all the three captives, he is the only one to surpass the tragedy of captivity and move on with his life. He succeeds in doing so since his role of the captor is strongest of the three. He is more of a captor than both Benito and Babo, while at the same time being the most typical captive.

Babo fails in freeing himself, and consequently dies at the end. But an important thing to note here is that Benito fails to free himself as well, even though the slave rebellion was ended. Benito is not only a captive in body. Melville goes a step beyond by creating a character whose spirit was also captured by Babo. In most captivity stories, characters undergo a transformation, they are changed and often they find a secret strength by uncovering their dark side. Hannah Dunstan had no qualms about killing the Indian family. The sailors aboard San Dominick took revenge on the slaves who hurt or insulted them. But Benito could not bring himself to face Babo. Killing one’s master is a sort of rite of passage, a ritual. Only by completing this task, the enslaved can regain their freedom. That is how Babo

justified killing Alexandro Aranda. Since Benito could not do it, he remained in Babo's power forever.

The last question that I will be addressing is the Americanness of firstly, the captivity narrative and, secondly, *Benito Cereno*.

The captivity narrative as such is often associated exclusively with the American literary production. The Indian captivity narrative is how most of the readers get to know the genre. So, this issue is pretty much settled.

The Americanness of *Benito Cereno*, however, is a bit more complex. Nina Baym argues that the notion of how American a work of fiction is has been the only criterion while determining the value of a given work since the establishment of studying literature in America. She further argues that "Until a tradition of American literature developed its own inherent forms, the early critic looked for a standard of Americanness rather than a standard of excellence." (126), adding that "the idea of Americanness is even more vulnerable to subjectivity than the idea of the best" (ibid.). So, in determining how American a novella written by Melville is, even today, whether we want to or not, we are in fact determining its position within the American literary canon. When it comes to Melville, though, if we're being honest, his position can hardly be dislodged. After all, he wrote *Moby Dick*, one of the Great American Novels. There hardly can be a work that is more American, except maybe *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

When it comes to *Benito Cereno*, its Americanness is evident in more than one way. It is American in dealing with the problem of slavery, although Melville chose to tackle that problem from a perspective that pertains not only to the United States, but also to the rest of the New World. In this novella we are faced with the realization that slavery was a problem that troubled the Spanish-speaking countries as well. We can observe this from a trans-national perspective and see that the United States were largely affected by the events that happened in other countries, primarily in Haiti. The Haitian Revolution not only served as an inspiration for Melville, but it also facilitated the Louisiana Purchase and helped form the United States as we know it today. In departing from this self-contained point of view, Melville might be departing from the typical Americanness, but he is embracing another kind of Americanness, one that includes the Latin America as well and places him within the context of a more global, more inclusive literary circle.

But the one element in *Benito Cereno* which is indisputably American is the character of Amasa Delano. Everything he says or does just epitomizes America. Wherever we start, from his radical innocence, his good nature or his industriousness, we see traits attributed to

America. One of the most American aspects of Delano, however, is his relationship towards history and events that lie in the past. He says to Benito: "The past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it. See, yon bright sun has forgotten it all, and the blue sea, and the blue sky; these have turned over new leaves." (103) The forgetfulness of the sea and its uniform surface, forgetting even the greatest battles and the direst storms, however, will take on a completely new form in *Moby Dick.* Unmourned, the horrors of history reveal the frightening facelessness and nothingness that lies behind the sea's ability to forget. And although on the surface the sea seems smiling, in its dark depths, it's hiding all of its miseries and long-forgotten ghosts: "millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries; all that we call lives and souls, lie dreaming, dreaming, still; tossing like slumberers in their beds; the ever-rolling waves but made so by their restlessness." (367) Instead of a warm, forgiving sea that washes off the accumulated cares and burdens of a troubled life, in "The Sphynx", the sea is revealed as the world's great haunted house: "Where unrecorded names and navies rust, and untold hopes and anchors rot; where in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned; there, in that awful water-land, there was thy most familiar home." (249) While there are few traits more American than the famous American optimism, paired with a short memory of the past and an undying hope in the new day, these insights reveal the dangers that lie in denial, in suppressing traumatic events from the collective consciousness. Benito's response to Delano's optimistic quip is equally peculiar: "Because they have no memory,' he dejectedly replied; 'because they are not human." (103)

Not only in this quote, but in the whole novella, a subtle warning lies- there are dangers in forgetting the past. Some things cannot be forgotten and some transgressions cannot be forgiven. Even though he could have created the second type of the captivity narrative that I mentioned earlier, where reconciliation is advocated since the captive sympathizes with his captors, it would only create a diversion, a false promise. It would only imitate tolerance and racial equality.

Melville is perhaps advocating here a different kind of Americanness, one that learns from the past, one that remembers the lesson of Haiti and one that must realize that slavery, as Delano put it, breeds negative passions in men. Here we discover the greatest problem tackled by Melville: America that was held captive by slavery, its great promises overshadowed by the even greater troubles looming on the horizon and the terrible crimes committed against humanity. It is America like Benito Cereno, dressed in its finest clothing, but weak, ill and frightened. And even though slavery has been abolished and America freed of it, the shadow

of slavery continued to loom over the country for many years to come, and, as evidenced by current events, still hasn't left.

2. *Moby Dick* Through Gothic-Tinted Glasses

As it is with all great literary works, *Moby Dick* transcends the boundaries of genre, simultaneously drawing upon multiple literary traditions, playing with various modes of expression, adopting more than one style and more than one theme, as well as subverting or reinterpreting many of the different elements it incorporates. Owing to all that, despite being eclectic, the novel, though it can be categorized by those who wish to do so, always to a certain extent stands alone, remaining, in one way or another, ultimately unplaceable. Some of the labels that can be ascribed to it are explored by Miller's guide to Melville, who punningly calls the novel "the grand hooded phantom". In his chapter on *Moby Dick*, he says:

> Resembling none of his predecessors, *Moby Dick* (1851) borrowed from all of them. The most obvious ingredients are the realism of the early tales of adventure fused with some of the allegory of *Mardi* and more of the symbolism of *Radburn* and *White Jacket*. *Moby Dick* has frequently been called an epic, and it is surely one metaphorically if not in fact. It memorializes the fabulous industry of whaling as well as embodies a good share of the complex metaphysical myth of nineteenth-century America, the "myth" born of the collision of the retreating world of puritan Calvinism and the emerging world of industrial materialism. *Moby Dick* has also been called a tragedy – a classification which has its justification. (75)

The reading of *Moby Dick* as a tragedy, of course, finds its primary argument within the heroic and flawed figure of Captain Ahab. Coincidentally (and not very surprisingly, considering the links between the two), the significance and centrality of the hero is also what places *Moby Dick* within the literary tradition of the epic:

> What defines epic, ancient and modern, for me is heroism, which transcends irony. The heroism of Dante the Pilgrim, of Milton in *Paradise Lost's* four great invocations, of Ahab and Walt Whitman as American questers, can be defined as persistence. Call it the persistence of vision, in which everything beheld is intensified by a spiritual

> aura. I never understood why Captain Ahab, Promethean defier of the tyranny of nature, is regarded by so many as a Macbeth-like villain, though he indeed echoes Macbeth. The epic hero is *contra naturam*: his quest is antithetical, from Jacob's refusal of dying through the violence of Achilles, who kills because he is not immortal, or to Hart Crane the Pilgrim, making his song one Bridge of Fire in defiance of America's failure to fulfill the prophecies of Walt Whitman. (Bloom, xiv)

The grandeur of the Napoleonic epic hero, as well as the novel's fascinations with the mysteries and forces of nature, the symbolism, mystery, the resonance, the poetic overtones, the relentless individualism; all of this can be seen as elements of Romanticism. Especially when it comes to individualism – to foreshadow some of the issues yet to be discussed in the following chapter, particularly the self-interested, narcissistic, anti-social urges as opposed to sociability, acceptance and conformism. To a certain extent, the whole discussion of the significance of an individual versus the significance of society, together with the ideas of destructive personal agency stemming from the subconscious can be seen as a reflection of the issues raised by the differences between Romanticism and Realism.

In a similar vein, Stern is arguing for an interpretation that incorporates terms of naturalism and idealism as key to understanding the text; terms which, if not broader and more generalized than the two previously mentioned, are at least more independent from the nomenclature of literary history. In his own words, "Melville's naturalism can fruitfully be approached by a comparison of his own orientation with representative productions of either cosmic or aesthetic idealism." (241) Down the page, he picks a side:

> "'The Try-Works' does indeed offer Melville's opposition to both cosmic and aesthetic idealism. Ishmael is guiding that Anarcharsis Clootz expedition, the Pequod, the ship of man, the ship of history, the ship of state. The crew is toiling redly at the fiery task of boiling out whales on the midnight ship, and 'then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul.' The fires, like the Parsee's fire-worship of an evil God, are equated with the hell-fire of Ahab's idealism; the direction taken by the plunging ship is equated with the supranatural direction of Ahab's quest. (ibid.)

Stern's interpretation of *Moby Dick* as an expression of Melville's stance against idealism and in favor of materialism, while superficially valid (if we consider where Ahab's idealism got

them), is still perhaps somewhat too dismissive. And while it is true that "The smell of mortality, the sights and mysteries of existence which, like sharks and whales and the squids, are dark things to a man's mind, are all part of the reality with which man must cope" (Stern 244), the frankness of that reality, which naturalism helps to express, as well as its effect on the human mind, the deep desire to rebel and to cry out, all of it is expressed in the other side of the coin, in this case the losing side, the idealistic, individualistic side, the side that goes down with the ship. I don't believe that naturalism and idealism are so much opposed in *Moby Dick* as they are complementary. To show the inner workings of the mind, the humane level that either bends or rebels under the pressures of reality, is something that materialism may not be able to show, and yet, precisely when expressed idealistically, these aspects become the most realistic.

Finally, with this interplay and coexistence of naturalism and idealism, somewhere in that long line of Isms, half of which weren't even mentioned, we stumble upon the Gothic. Even though we may be inclined to put it in the same folder as Romanticism and idealism, the truth about the Gothic is a little more complex. As Crow contends in his introduction to the *American Gothic*, "While the Gothic is often seen as a variant of Romanticism, or a subset within it, some early Gothic masterpieces (like Walpole's) actually appear in the Neoclassical period and precede the landmark works of early Romanticism." (3) In a subsequent chapter, Crow further argues that "Realism and the Gothic seem opposed, contradictory, but they respond to the same issues and often were created by the same authors. The Gothic of this time was Realism's shadow or dark twin." (65) This may seem counter-intuitive at first, especially considering that a Gothic work is most likely going to be seen as a romance, and romances are by definition romantic and fanciful. Realism was a notion reserved for and first introduced by the emerging novel. Whether we attribute its invention to Richardson, Fielding and Defoe of the English tradition or to Cervantes on the global stage, the early novel stood in stark opposition to "the use of marvelous in fiction." (Clery, 22) Irony, naturalism, relatable and honest portrayal of human character as opposed to virtues or vices embodied, as well as heroes with depth, at first objectionable, but later more than anything pitiable and noble in their fallacies – those were the landmarks of the novel. However, the distinction between the two styles of writing was not clear-cut, and Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, which can be seen as a starting point for Gothic fiction, thrived on this ambiguity. As Clery reports, "Walpole wanted to combine the unnatural occurrences associated with romance and the naturalistic characterization and dialogue of the novel." (24) In the same vein, he later adds,

"The credible emotions of the characters connect us to incredible phenomena and events and allow terror to circulate via processes of identification and projection." (25) This tradition of creating credible and relatable characters, as well as convincing and naturalistic settings, and then suffusing them with the improbable or the uncanny, continued as a staple in Gothic fiction, and Melville is one of the authors in that tradition. Savoy argues that "Melville invests the most realistic, documentary narratives with the shadows of Gothic terror" (178). If we follow that train of thought and try to apply it to our reading of *Moby Dick*, we will soon find that "the most realistic, documentary narratives" are much easier to pinpoint and enumerate. However, that is not so because they are more prevalent or more important. Far from it; the other aspect of the novel, "the shadows of Gothic terror", are just as significant, even if markedly more elusive. The reason for this elusiveness lies in the fact that the Gothic elements are more varied, more interspersed and at times more subtle than the vivid naturalistic descriptions which seem to make up the core of the narrative. This subtlety escapes a lot of the Gothic readings of *Moby Dick*, or perhaps more accurately Gothic glances, which often focus on one or two key points in the novel, merely to recognize the fact that there is indeed something Gothic to it. The element most often in the center of attention is the least subtle one of them all, the eponymous white whale, as the symbol to end all symbols, whose faceless whiteness at the same time stands for death, God, nature, evil, injustice and the immutability of the human condition. Such readings are, of course, never wrong, but they are also insufficient when it comes to gauging the depths to which Melville took the Gothic in writing *Moby Dick*. Gothic aspects can be encountered on almost every level in the novel. To be more precise, Gothic exists in the text on the level of chapters, episodes, events, conversations, characters, phenomena and even on the level of language, appearing in names or as an implication in sentences. To be more succinct, all of that can be reduced to three categories: themes, narrative and language.

When it comes to the Gothic as present in the language of *Moby Dick*, the very first example of that can be seen in the title of the very first chapter: "Loomings". The Cambridge online English dictionary provides the following definition for the word 'looming': "(Of something unwanted or unpleasant) about to happen soon and causing worry". The Free Dictionary (also online) has the following to say about the verb 'loom': "To come into view as a massive, distorted, or indistinct image". The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines the same word as "to appear in a large, strange, or frightening form often in a sudden way: to appear in an impressively large or great form", "to appear in an impressively great or exaggerated form"

and “to take shape as an impending occurrence”. And while the editors of the Norton Critical Edition of *Moby Dick* provide the following alternative definition, saying that the meaning in “A nautical sense is land or ships beyond the horizon, dimly seen by reflection in peculiar weather conditions” (18, note 1), we can still argue that there is hardly anything more Gothic than what the title suggests.

From that point on, the Gothic elements just keep piling on. After reading the famous introductory sentence, we are faced with the theme of a seemingly unmotivated melancholy that plagues Ishmael. Motifs such as death, suicide and depressive states of mind are weaved into the narrative at the top of the first page. What should be (especially to Melville’s contemporaries, familiar with his previous works, *Typee* and *Omoo*) an exciting adventure narrative, marketable and palatable, immediately reveals itself as something darker and more philosophical. The sentence in question reads:

> “Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can. This is my substitute for pistol and ball.” (Melville 18)

If we’re talking about Gothic themes, here we encounter negativity, anxiety, antisocial, almost psychotic tendencies, social withdrawal, suicide and death. When it comes to language, words such as ‘grim’, ‘damp, drizzly November’, ‘soul’, ‘coffin’, ‘funeral’ and ‘hypos’ are not only powerfully suggestive, but also present throughout the novel. To deal with at least some of these instances, terms “sublime, “uncanny” and “grotesque”, as used by Crow, will prove very useful. Within the Gothic setting, the terms refer to the following: “The sublime replaces comfortable beauty with a beauty that mingles awe and even fear… a kind of beauty that is irregular, strange, disturbing and even frightening.” (Crow 6) Meanwhile, “’grotesque’ refers to the strange, distorted or monstrous, usually as applied to human characters.” (ibid.) Lastly, the uncanny means “a sense of weirdness, created when something that seemed safe and familiar suddenly becomes strange, or something that should have remained hidden is revealed”, including “the idea of a haunted house: the place that should have been comforting, home-like, revealing something ominous or threatening.” (Crow, 7) Roots of the uncanny, as explained by Crow, are found in Freud. A more contemporary use of the term is revealed in

the notion of the uncanny valley, referring to negative emotions, uneasiness and even disgust elicited in humans by forms (most commonly humanoid robots) that imitate human features, movements and speech, although not quite perfectly, letting the observer know that something's off. Such an imitation, "not quite convincing, is more disturbing to the average viewer than a digital human that is clearly not meant to be realistic" (Dodgson et al. 92-93). In literature, an early example of this is encountered, unsurprisingly, in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. This also ties in with the term 'abhuman', another key notion useful for this discussion.

When we take all this into consideration, it is quite fitting that the setting of *Moby Dick* is the sea, which, following the outlined meaning of the three key notions, is at the same time sublime, grotesque and uncanny. There is no greater haunted house on Earth than the sea. More than two thirds of the world we call home is plunged in darkness which we can only partially illuminate. This subconscious fear that we may not be at home on our very home planet, is revealed for example in Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*, where the shadow of an unfathomable ghost looms, an evil that sleeps, the eternal undead. More recently, James Cameron's movie *The Abyss (1989)* and a host of other 'monster' stories, including the Japanese 'kaiju' genre and its spin-offs, most recently *Pacific Rim (2013),* represent an expression of this fear in popular culture.

In *Moby Dick,* Ishmael contemplates the magnetism, the unexplainable attraction of the sea. The 'landsmen' "must get just as nigh the water as they possibly can without falling in." (19) But what secret power is it that draws them in? Although at first Ishmael dwells on all the elements which, using our terminology, we may refer to as the 'sublime' aspects of the sea, he soon returns to the theme of death with the story of Narcissus, which suggests that perhaps not only the sea and its appeal, but all of human dreams and desires have an inherent self-destructive and suicidal side to them (much in line with the interpretation of desires in psychoanalysis). The ultimate unspeakable desire, the incestuous desire of unification with the mother is inherently unsustainable, since it implies the negation of the subject (the only way the subject can be joined with the mother is by becoming devoured by her – a part of her womb). In an evolutionary sense, the sea is our mother since all life stems from the sea. So, this desire of unification with the sea, while an integral part of the subject, can also never be attained, since it simultaneously means the end of the subject.

Setting all this aside, what Ishmael actually has to say about the appeal of the sea is the following: "It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all."

(20) Even here, the Gothic is obvious: in this element of something beyond, something more, something behind the veil that cannot ever truly be grasped. Apart from that, the word 'phantom' is also very telling as a synonym for 'ghost', 'apparition', 'wraith', 'haunt', 'phantasm', etc. This choice of words is pointed and deliberate. Had the narrator used a different word, perhaps 'spirit', or 'wealth', or 'mystery', perhaps 'meaning' (and all of these words can be used in that sentence), the meaning of that sentence and the novel itself may be significantly altered. The very expression "phantom of life" is an oxymoron, a contradiction: life as a ghost, something that haunts and terrorizes us with its mystery and complexity; something that, even though it defines us, even though it makes us who we are, we still do not understand or control, which makes life, ironically, the ultimate uncanny, almost 'objet petit a' in the Lacanian sense or the Real, in Žižek's words, "a paradoxical element which, in its very identity, embodies absolute otherness, the irreparable gap which makes it impossible to occupy a metalanguage position." (175)

But it is not only life that gets called a phantom in this chapter. The line that reads, "the great flood-gates of the wonder-world swung open, and in the wild conceits that swayed me to my purpose, two and two there floated into my inmost soul, endless processions of the whale, and, mid most of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air" (Melville, 22), refers of course to Moby Dick, even though here it is merely hinted at. The choice of words is again not something that happens by chance; it suggests on the one hand that Moby Dick is in a sense a phantom, a ghost or a curse that haunts and ultimately dooms Captain Ahab and his crew, but also, due to the earlier usage of the word, we can draw parallels between Moby Dick and life, one grand and hooded, the other ungraspable, as such both unknowable, both phantoms, and both looming over Ishmael in this chapter titled 'Loomings', just "like a snow hill in the air".

And while the first chapter is part-philosophical and part laden with symbols, but in nature introductory and almost all over the place, the second chapter is where the story actually takes off. It is interesting that Ishmael chooses to sail from Nantucket instead of New Bedford, which is the first step on his journey and the place where he gets stranded for a few days. The reasoning behind his decision is also immensely indicative of the direction this novel has opted to take. What Ishmael says is that

> New Bedford has of late been gradually monopolizing the business of whaling, and though in this matter poor old Nantucket is now much behind her, yet Nantucket was her great original-the Tyre of this Carthage;-the place where the first dead American

> whale was stranded. Where else but from Nantucket did those aboriginal whalemen, the Red-Men, first sally out in canoes to give chase to the Leviathan? And where but from Nantucket, too, did that first adventurous little sloop put forth, partly laden with imported cobblestones-so goes the story-to throw at the whales, in order to discover when they were nigh enough to risk a harpoon from the bowsprit? (Melville, 23)

In other words, New Bedford embodies the typical American values of marketability, of industriousness, of progress. Nantucket, on the other hand, is New Bedford's predecessor and in a way its shadow. While New Bedford is focused on the future, Nantucket is firmly anchored in the past. New Bedford is current and ahistorical, and Nantucket is laden with history. The significance of this location, though it may at first seem just like a minor detail, is illustrated by a following passage from Smith:

> His sense of difficulty in finding imaginative sustenance was to be endorsed by Hawthorne, who wrote in 1859 of the 'broad and simple daylight' and common-place prosperity' of his country, so different from the shadow and mystery and sense of gloomy wrong that the ruins of Italy suggested. Without a feudal past and those relics so convenient for the European Gothicist, castles and monasteries and legends, the American landscape seemed an unlikely place for such fictions. (163)

In that sense, the location of Nantucket plays a similar role as that which in more recent American literature is played by the South – a place that hasn't forgotten its past, a place that has layers of history and as such serves as fertile ground for Gothic literature. Much later, in chapter 16, Ishmael deliberately chooses the Pequod for very much the same reasons why he opted for Nantucket:

> You never saw such a rare old craft as this same rare old Pequod. She was a ship of the old school, rather small if anything; with an old-fashioned claw-footed look about her. Long seasoned and weather-stained in the typhoons and calms of all four oceans, her old hull's complexion was darkened like a French grenadier's, who has alike fought in Egypt and Siberia. Her venerable bows looked bearded. Her masts-cut somewhere on the coast of Japan, where her original ones were lost overboard in a gale-her masts stood stiffly up like the spines of the three old kings of Cologne. Her ancient decks were worn and wrinkled, like the pilgrim-worshipped flag-stone in Canterbury Cathedral where Becket bled. (Melville, 69)

Where do we even begin to approach this short passage, surprisingly filled with subliminal Gothic elements? Well, first of all, the name Pequod comes from “a celebrated tribe of Massachusetts Indians; now extinct as the ancient Medes.” (ibid.) In other words, it takes its name from a dead nation; a dead name for a ghost ship, full of soon to be dead men. Secondly, like Nantucket, it is immersed in history: ‘old’ and ‘ancient’ are the adjectives that are used to describe it. After that, and more in other places than here, the ship is described as ‘black’ and ‘dark’. The last sentence, however, is perhaps the most interesting. Why was it necessary to add that the ship resembles a place where someone bled? Even if that were true, the fact that Becket bled there has no effect on the appearance of either the cathedral or the ship, which is being described here. If indeed, it is the ship’s appearance that is being described. The implication is what matters. The ship resembles a place where someone died. It resembles a haunted place. Coincidentally, the Canterbury Cathedral is famously built in the Gothic style, and Archbishop Thomas Becket (mentioned in the footnotes on the same page) was assassinated there in 1170, the same timeframe as fictional events described in many early Gothic novels, originators of the genre. And while those early Gothic novels often took place in Italy and in the past, Melville found in Nantucket an equivalent to these distant lands, so unlike America, immersed in history; and in Pequod he found his haunted mansion, his castle, his cathedral.

“It was a very dubious-looking, nay, a very dark and dismal night, bitingly cold and cheerless.” (Melville 23), says Ishmael at the outset of his journey. And while Nantucket and the Pequod are thematically Gothic sooner than anything else, the language and the narration of the second chapter is what lends it its Gothic vibe. To illustrate further: “Such dreary streets! blocks of blackness, not houses, on either hand, and here and there a candle, like a candle moving about in a tomb.” (ibid. 24) Just a few lines down, we come across this marvel: “It seemed the great Black Parliament sitting in Tophet. A hundred black faces turned round in their rows to peer; and beyond, a black Angel of Doom was beating a book in a pulpit. It was a negro church; and the preacher's text was about the blackness of darkness, and the weeping and wailing and teeth-gnashing there.”

Having moved on, Ishmael at last settles down in an inn whose owner’s last name is Coffin, which also introduces the next chapter. The word ‘coffin’, occurring here as a name, makes its appearance in several other crucial instances throughout the novel, always very ominous and suggestive, making it one of the most obvious and recurrent examples of the Gothic subtext. At Peter Coffin’s inn, Ishmael informs us in the very first sentence of its resemblance to a

“condemned old craft”. Another thing that comes into focus is the mysterious oil painting, which Ishmaels spends a great deal of time trying to decipher. The way it is described, it can be seen as either an example of ‘the sublime’ of ‘the grotesque’. And apart from it serving as a kind of foreshadowing, the words used to describe it are of particular interest as an example of the Gothic infiltrating the language of the novel. To quote a few phrases used to describe it: “unequal cross-lights”, “unaccountable masses of shades and shadows”, “New England hags”, “chaos bewitched”, “long, limber, portentous, black mass”, “boggy, soggy, squitchy”, “nervous”, “indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity”, “marvelous”, “unnatural combat of the four primal elements”, “blasted heath” and others.

One phrase that stands out in particular is the painting’s comparison to a “Black Sea in a midnight gale”. The phrase is very indicative of the suggestive use of language in the novel. This is not a simple comparison to be taken at face value. One can argue that the expression “Black Sea” as used here is unnecessary, an uncalled for surplus, since the Black Sea is no more black than any other sea, and all seas look the same in a midnight gale. Ishmael could have simply compared the painting to “a sea in a midnight gale”, or “the Carribean Sea in a midnight gale”. However, what we are dealing with here is the poetic use of language, instead of one that is referential and informative.

Such use of language, including the building of suspense and relying on various Gothic literary devices is quite often self-consciously used by Melville to subvert the reader’s expectations for an ironic, parodying effect. The best example of this can be seen later in the same chapter, with the introduction of Queequeg and the innkeeper’s remarks and suggestions used to generate mock-suspense. By the time Queequeg actually enters the scene, he’s already set in Ishmael’s mind as “the infernal head-peddler”. Interesting parallels can be drawn between this scene and the general narrative of the novel. When Queequeg first appears, Ishmael’s perception of him is greatly skewed based on the innkeeper’s remarks, and the impression is only further amplified by his glaring otherness. The way he’s described is very vivid and engrossing and should be particularly interesting from the point of view of postcolonial criticism. However, the most shocking aspect of Queequeg is the obvious disparity between the description which precedes him and the initial impression of him compared to his later portrayal as Ishmael’s closest friend and a character who exemplifies the ideal we might call “the noble savage”. This disparity lays bare the dangers inherent in narration. Ishmael himself is not a reliable narrator. Let us not forget his ‘hypos’, his antisocial tendencies and him being drawn towards funerals and coffins in the first chapter.

The premonitions and signs which he sees find their way to the pages of the novel. The meaning and content of the painting, mentioned earlier, is, as he himself states, unclear and indescribable, and yet he offers us his own view and his own interpretation. Interestingly enough, his interpretation is typically dark and ominous and serves as a foreshadowing of future events. It lends a sort of mystery to Moby Dick and a sense of destiny, of supernatural intervention. And not only that, but the way Ahab is described is often very subjective and laden with impressions as well. That and many instances throughout the novel that hint at hidden mysterious forces at work, the strange coincidences and omens such as "the spirit-spout", all of that can be seen as Ishmael's subjective and traumatized coloring of an otherwise realistic and plausible event and experience.

However, despite this undermining of the narrator's own reliability, it should be noted that it doesn't take anything away from the depth of the novel and the wealth of meaning and available interpretations, including the Gothic reading. Quite the contrary, the use of unreliable narration and events that can be read either way is commonplace in Gothic fiction. Two famous examples include *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights.*

Such subtleties, i.e. the use of one set of conventions, and then subverting and parodying those very same conventions, creates a lively, inspired narrative that constantly shifts between serious, metaphysical, philosophical considerations and the ominous, inevitable progression of decay and destruction and light-hearted parodying of the same, even openly calling out "light-headed Platonists" and throwing in a slew of low-brow, vulgar jokes (joking about flatulence and the officers breathing second-hand air, the homoerotic and humorous innuendo of Ishmael being Queequeg's bride and the unenviable position of Flask among others). This diversity and interplay greatly increase the literary merit of the novel and elevate it above the narrow constraints of any genre.

After Ishmael and Queequeg get acquainted, the following chapter again opens up with Gothic elements, once more hinting at Ishmael's impressionability paired up with the general unreliability of narrative. The episode in question is Ishmael's retelling of his disturbing childhood memory. All the elements of a Gothic story are here: nightmares, phantoms, darkness, an overbearing and cruel woman (stepmother abusing her authority) and a phenomenon that cannot be explained, lingering at the very edge of comprehension. His room becomes a perfect example of the uncanny: previously bathed in light, now plunged in darkness; and all the while a mysterious force can be felt, a spell that could perhaps be lifted

with a single word, a single motion: “For what seemed ages piled on ages, I lay there, frozen with the most awful fears, not daring to drag away my hand; yet ever thinking that if I could but stir it one single inch, the horrid spell would be broken.” (Melville 37)

The Gothic elements of the novel become a bit more subdued as the narrative moves on, at least until we reach chapter 7, which presents us with a beautiful meditation on death:

> In what census of living creatures, the dead of mankind are included; why it is that a universal proverb says of them, that they tell no tales, though containing more secrets than the Goodwin Sands! how it is that to his name who yesterday departed for the other world, we prefix so significant and infidel a word, and yet do not thus entitle him, if he but embarks for the remotest Indies of this living earth; why the Life Insurance Companies pay death-forfeitures upon immortals; in what eternal, unstirring paralysis, and deadly, hopeless trance, yet lies antique Adam who died sixty round centuries ago; how it is that we still refuse to be comforted for those who we nevertheless maintain are dwelling in unspeakable bliss; why all the living so strive to hush all the dead; wherefore but the roumour of a knocking in a tomb will terrify a whole city. All these things are not without their meanings. (Melville 45)

This chapter is one of the three initial chapters dealing with the questions of religion, culminating in Father Mapple’s sermon of chapter 9. Talking about Jonah, Mapple says: “He thinks that a ship made by men, will carry him into countries where God does not reign but only the Captains of this earth.” (Melville 49) A curious parallelism is drawn between the roles of captains and God and, in a way, the comparison starts with Captains being equal or equivalent to God. From one point of view, the sea can be seen as outside the reach of God, outside society, and as such exempt from the law, while becoming a part of society means limiting one’s own freedoms and become subject to the law. The underlying end truth that Father Mapple is aiming at, in line with the disparity between individualism and communalism, is that there is no place outside society, since being human means carrying society with us. In the same vein, the parallel between Ishmael and Jonah can be easily drawn. Ishmael, antisocial and individualistic, tries to escape society’s constraints, which in the end turns out to be a futile pursuit. Surviving his shipwreck, he’s consigned to the duty of spreading the word as a narrator of these tragic events (another meta-textual moment within the novel).

The subsequent chapters focus on the developing relationship between Ishmael and Queequeq, and while immensely interesting from various points of view, particularly as they question and subvert Christian values and play with the idea of the noble savage, while the typically Western values are seen as a corrupting influence, to deal with them here in greater detail would prove to be too great a digression.

In chapter 14, the history of Nantucket, previously touched upon, is explored in greater detail, including its past, the myths and the stories as well as its significance. The people of Nantucket, as Ishmael tells it, own the sea, they live off it and they rule over it. They have a greater right than anyone to call the sea their home – which makes it only logical that a Nantucketer would be the most affected and the most offended when he finds out that his home is haunted.

The following chapter is filled with bad portents, just as Ishmael himself points out: “It's ominous, thinks I. A Coffin my Innkeeper upon landing in my first whaling port; tombstones staring at me in the whalemen's chapel, and here a gallows! and a pair of prodigious black pots too! Are these last throwing out oblique hints touching Tophet?” (Melville 67) Even though Ishmael is quickly distracted from having such thoughts, all of this taken together is amazingly Gothic, as the narrative is constantly bombarded with premonitions, or loomings if you will. The seriousness of the chapter is, however, soon offset by a series of puns, jokes and witty remarks. It is followed by chapter 16, titled “The Ship”, and in it the first mention of Pequod the haunted cannibal castle, the first real hint of Moby Dick, “the monstrousest parmacetty”, and the introduction of Captain Ahab, “a grand, ungodly, god-like man”. We first learn of Ahab through a brief retelling of his incident with Moby Dick. No description of him is offered, no qualities or values he holds up highly, but instead only the sentence: “Clap eye on Captain Ahab, young man, and thou wilt find that he has only one leg." (Melville 72) In that way, he is first defined on the one hand by a negative, a deficit, literally ‘not having something’, and on the other hand, by his position in relation to Moby Dick: that is, by being against him. This antagonism is not only one facet of his character; it is the most important facet of his character, his defining idiosyncrasy, the trait that introduces him and makes him known to us as readers. In simple terms, Ahab is characterized as and by being against Moby Dick, which means that he is interestingly determined by a negative (both in a qualitative – not having something, but also in a relational sense –being against something) or a non-quality; in other words he is not defined by his inherent virtues or vices or particular traits, but rather by being ‘against’, by being oppositional, adverse, irreconcilable, insubordinate and

unyielding. Of course, not long after, we do get an account of what Ahab is like in a more general sense:

> He's a queer man, Captain Ahab-so some think-but a good one. Oh, thou'lt like him well enough; no fear, no fear. He's a grand, ungodly, god-like man, Captain Ahab; doesn't speak much; but, when he does speak, then you may well listen. Mark ye, be forewarned; Ahab's above the common; Ahab's been in colleges, as well as 'mong the cannibals; been used to deeper wonders than the waves; fixed his fiery lance in mightier, stranger foes than whales. His lance! aye, the keenest and surest that out of all our isle! Oh! he ain't Captain Bildad; no, and he ain't Captain Peleg; he's Ahab, boy; and Ahab of old, thou knowest, was a crowned king!"
>
> "And a very vile one. When that wicked king was slain, the dogs, did they not lick his blood?" (Melville 78)

The question that Ishmael poses at the end there perfectly reflects Ahab's conflicting character, very flawed and very human. Still, the question arises, why couldn't we get an account of what Captain Ahab was like before learning of his defect and his disposition in relation to Moby Dick? The answer to that is simple. In one case it reads: "He's a grand, complex man and he lost a leg", while in the other it's closer to "His life was hard, tragic and unfair, but he's a grand man". On the one hand, his life justifies his character by coming first. If his character traits came first, they would seem like an arbitrary, fixed thing, or like personal fancies of Captain Peleg. On the other hand, had the narrator chosen to describe Ahab first, without saying anything about his predicament, it would seem almost like his predicament is an afterthought, even though it is in fact the very thing that defines it, which is why it comes first. The curious part is, the fact that he lost a leg hardly seems like a valid reason for the amount of hate he feels towards Moby Dick. When observed objectively, it is only a minor incident compared to all the tragedies that can happen on a whaling voyage. However, that overreaction is the very thing that holds the key to understanding Ahab: the antagonism defines him; his position as a man with a fundamental lacking, something key and instrumental that is missing, as well as his core trait of being a rebel, of being against. One may argue, convincingly even, that Ahab's specific character traits are an afterthought, borrowed from Shakespeare and Milton, to answer the question: who would be the man to go against Moby Dick? Who would dare to try the impossible? Who would defy all odds, all logic and all reason? And the more we look at it, the more we realize that only such a

character as Captain Ahab could realistically fulfill such a role. However, these considerations are brought into question if we take the time to study the following quote:

> And when these things unite in a man of greatly superior natural force, with a globular brain and a ponderous heart; who has also by the stillness and seclusion of many long night-watches in the remotest waters, and beneath constellations never seen here at the north, been led to think untraditionally and independently; receiving all nature's sweet or savage impressions fresh from her own virgin voluntary and confiding breast, and thereby chiefly, but with some help from accidental advantages, to learn a bold and nervous lofty language-that man makes one in a whole nation's census-a mighty pageant creature, formed for noble tragedies. (Melville 73)

From this perspective, it almost seems like the character of Ahab comes first, in which case we could argue that Melville's initial intention was to create a great tragedy or an epic, and the subject matter was chosen to complement an already preconceived ideal of the hero. Though the dilemma may seem interesting, trying to determine which is the case is inherently a lost cause, since we can neither have the hero without the novel, nor can we have the novel without the hero. Still, the passages serve as a great insight into what makes a great man and a hero (particularly a tragic hero) from the perspective of the narrative.

To return to the Gothic, this chapter also uncovers the origins of his ominous name, a prophecy which says it would somehow prove significant, as well as a couple of traits that (though merely hinted at) paint him in a less favorable, villainous light; namely him being reclusive, moody and savage (all traits of Gothic villains). In the end, even though Peleg tries to reassure Ishmael, he has little success justifying the character of Ahab, as if he isn't quite sure himself, but is trying to mask it, leaving Ishmael filled with feelings of mystery, awe, sympathy and sorrow.

The next couple of chapters return to a more jovial, almost adventurous tone. There's the whole matter of Queequeg being locked up in the room, the landlady's sign saying "no suicides permitted here, and no smoking in the parlor" and Queequeg being mistakenly named Quohog by Captain Bildad.

Another crucial chapter is the one that introduces Elijah the prophet. His name is just one in a line of symbolic elements strewn throughout the text. He shares his name with the biblical Elijah, who stood against King Ahab of the Old Testament. His prophecies, hardly more than suggestions and fear-mongering, could have been spoken by anyone who was acquainted with

Ahab's life story, even though there are some unexplainable elements. His comment, "Anything down there about your souls?" (Melville 87), after Ishmael and Queequeg signed their articles, hints at the common theme of signing a contract with the Devil. And the Devil in this case, as the discourse suggests, is Captain Ahab. There are four crucial things that happened to him, four events that define him:

> But nothing about that thing that happened to him off Cape Horn, long ago, when he lay like dead for three days and nights; nothing about that deadly skrimmage with the Spaniard afore the altar in Santa?-heard nothing about that, eh? Nothing about the silver calabash he spat into? And nothing about his losing his leg last voyage, according to the prophecy. (Melville 87)

The first even suggests that Ahab was on the brink of death, nearly dead or perhaps truly dead, and returned to this world, unholy and unnatural. Some implications of this information might come handy later, so let's keep it in mind. The second two are basically instances of blasphemy: an implication that an altar was desecrated by killing a man in a holy place, as well as spitting in a relic. The last indicates that he is marked by a prophecy that dooms him and all who follow him. The big thing, the secret, however, remains unspoken.

This encounter with Elijah is not Ishmael and Queequeg's only one, though. On the day they're supposed to set sail, again an ominously misty morning, they see shadows of sailors running towards the ship. Elijah's mysterious taunt, "Did ye see anything looking like men going towards that ship a while ago?" (Melville 91), casts doubt over what they saw. Note the peculiar phrasing "anything looking like men", instead of just "men", hinting at something mysterious, even reminiscent of the uncanny valley previously discussed. He challenges them to try to find those men they saw, and they fail to do so. His parting words suggest that he won't see them again before the Final Judgment. Talking to the old rigger aboard ship, they learn that "The Captain came aboard last night." (Melville 93) and that he "remained invisibly enshrined within his cabin" (ibid.). The two sentences again suggest uncommon and indicative practices. Why would the Captain board his ship under the cover of darkness? The words that are used are very telling, too: "enshrined within his cabin". Enshrined, shrine, mausoleum, sepulcher, grave, tomb, entombed – all of these words would many times be used to refer to his descent into his cabin or as an expression used to refer to the cabin itself. The implication, obviously, is that he is almost like some kind of a vampire that remains hidden in the catacombs beneath his castle and leaves only under the cover of darkness to feast upon the flesh of his victims. With the mysterious shadows that ran towards that ship on that misty

morning, such a suggestion is not at all a harmless one. Their departure, on a “sharp, cold Christmas”, of course, is likewise far from a naïve, adventurous foray into distant, exotic lands and across new horizons, no, they “gave three heavy-hearted cheers, and blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic.” (Melville 96)

The first days on the ship are filled with metaphysical musings about the nature of the soul, about liberty, about whaling, followed by two chapters about the three mates and the harpooners (“Knights and Squires”). The first one is entirely dedicated to the description of Starbuck. He is described not romantically, like Ahab usually is, but realistically, in great detail and depth, with psychological motivation being recorded as well. If this were a novel of Realism, Starbuck would be its hero. Stubb and Flask are also seen to be complete characters, with realistic motivations, determined by their position in the ship’s hierarchy and their unique social circumstances. While explaining Stubb’s peculiar indifferent and easygoing outlook on life, Ishmael quips: “I say this continual smoking must have been one cause, at least of his peculiar disposition; for every one knows that this earthly air, whether ashore or afloat, is terribly infected with the nameless miseries of the numberless mortals who have died exhaling it.” (Melville 105) Which is to say, the air itself is haunted by the sufferings of the dead, which continuously infect our mind.

And this mirthful idea brings us to the character of Captain Ahab, the topic of the next chapter. There are several interesting points that this chapter brings to the forefront. Ahab has so far remained unseen, which makes it seem almost like his very existence is an illusion. At the very least, it builds suspense around his eventual appearance. That he is indeed there, the following sentence confirms: “Yes, their supreme lord and dictator was there, though hitherto unseen by any eyes not permitted to penetrate into the now sacred retreat of the cabin.” (Melville 108)

Since the words ‘supreme lord’ are usually reserved for God, this brings us back to the previous analogy between God and “the Captains of this world”, as well as raising questions about governance and authority, especially of the monarchic kind. The words “sacred retreat of the cabin” on the one hand play on the elaborate metaphor of the tomb, and on the other hand serve to construct the idea of a ‘forbidden place’ or ‘sacred ground’. The buildup that precedes Ahab is another example of the masterful use of language employed by the author to create a sense of foreboding. The Gothic atmosphere is particularly enhanced by the following densely interwoven words and expressions: “ascended”, “strange”, “disquietude”, “unknown”, “seclusion”, “perturbation”, “Elijah's diabolical incoherences uninvitedly recurring to me,

with a subtle energy I could not have before conceived of", "moods", "solemn", "outlandish", "apprehensiveness", "uneasiness", "heathenish", "abandonedly", "colorless misgivings", "merciless", "grey and gloomy", "melancholy" and, marking the first appearance of Ahab, his first direct description by the narrator, "foreboding shivers ran over me. Reality outran apprehension; Captain Ahab stood upon his quarter-deck" (Melville 108). In line with the richly dark narration of the chapter, Ahab's first appearance reeks of the Gothic. Ishmael does not see him bathed in light; he does not perceive him as an image of heroism or of kindness, nor does he say "I was happy to see him". Instead, it's "foreboding shivers" and "apprehension". There are two ways we can see this. From one perspective, we can say that Ishmael is a deeply impressionable and superstitious hypochondriac, who, in line with his being an unreliable narrator, allowed Elijah's incoherent ramblings to get to him, and after obsessing over his own fears, is now projecting the already malformed, demonic image of the doomed and damned captain onto an average wiry, sickly, weather-beaten old man. The other possibility is that there was indeed something more to Ahab, enough to elicit a sense of awe and feelings of fear. This position can be easily defended if we take into consideration the effects Ahab's personality has on the crew, even though it is unclear how much of that can be ascribed to his very position and authority as Captain of the ship, paired with self-fulfilling prophecies brought about by confirmation bias, as well as a kind of collective madness, where in a closed environment such as the ship, everyone's opinions and fears just get amplified and repeatedly confirmed in an endless echo chamber situation. And all of this without even taking into consideration how notoriously superstitious sailors can be. The novel does amazing work of walking a fine line between suggestions of something otherworldly and supernatural and the implication that it could merely be imaginations running wild. It pushes the boundaries of what is plausible, likely and probable, while simultaneously making seemingly ordinary things and events appear mystical and unusual. The true success of the novel, however, does not lie in suggesting that Ishmael may be unreliable and superstitious; it also plays on the perceptions and emotions of the readers being just as flawed and prone to suggestion; so the readers themselves must get their hands dirty and are in a very real danger of getting 'duped'. Still, being that narration is inherently flawed, and since we must take Ishmael's word for it, the greatest mystery and the greatest beauty is in the simple fact that we can never truly know. As we will see many times later, whenever there are events bordering on the supernatural, the unreliability and uncertainty of it gets reaffirmed in one way or another.

To illustrate the contrasting aspects of Ahab, both as a villain and as a hero, as well as several of the literary devices described above, here's Ishmael's initial impression (his impression, let's keep that in mind) of Ahab, presented in full, along with commentary[2]:

"There seemed no sign of common bodily illness about him, nor of the recovery from any." The implication here is, even though his appearance was unusual, it didn't seem to stem from any earthly or easily explainable cause. There was a force driving him and keeping him together that set him apart from everyone else, but at the same time disfigured him in a way that is impossible to describe: made him uncanny, so that his strangeness cannot be explained in simple terms. "He looked like a man cut away from the stake, when the fire has overrunningly wasted all the limbs without consuming them, or taking away one particle from their compacted aged robustness." Here he is compared to a morbidly disfigured corpse; the suggestion is an example of the grotesque. Apart from that, it is one of the many subtle references to him being dead, similar to the dead or back from the dead (we previously encountered the fact that his cabin is frequently compared to a tomb and Elijah's retelling of the story where he lay "like dead" for three days, much like Jesus Christ). The crux of the comparison, however, is his "compacted aged robustness" that remained after the fires of life burned away all the 'unnecessary' flair; we might even say his humanity. Due to the last part of the sentence, it is obvious that nothing negative is represented here: his appearance and, by extension, his character, is redeemed with a certain nobility. The words used to achieve it, however, are not irrelevant. "His whole high, broad form, seemed made of solid bronze, and shaped in an unalterable mould, like Cellini's cast Perseus." Unlike the previous sentence, which, considering the imagery used, reads like the aspect of a villain, here the converse is employed by comparing him to a famous hero. Note also the words used: "high", "broad", "solid", "bronze", "unalterable mould" and "cast". Many of them, especially "broad" and "bronze" would continue to be used to describe him throughout the novel. The most important aspect of this sentence, however, does not lie in its content, but in its position within the text. Following immediately after the sentence that portrays him like a villain, it emphasizes his conflicting, contradictory nature: at the same time a charred corpse and an image of a bronze demi-god. "Threading its way out from among his grey hairs, and continuing right down one side of his tawny scorched face and neck, till it disappeared in his clothing, you saw a slender rod-like mark, lividly whitish." This sentence serves simply to reassert the fact that Captain

[2] All of the passages quoted are from a single long paragraph on pages 108 and 109 of the Norton Critical Edition of *Moby Dick.*

Ahab is a marked man, and not only in the sense that there is a prophecy concerning him, but also in a real sense, reflected in his physical appearance. The true nature of the prophecy and his mark is never elaborated upon; the fact that he is marked is suggestive enough. In a general sense, we could say that he's predestined for great things, or marked by destiny, though in reality he is much closer to being mocked by destiny. In a sense, he is marked for doom, destruction and downfall. More than anything else, I believe that the prophecy concerning Ahab, as well as his mark, should be interpreted as one aspect or one embodiment of his 'hamartia'; his tragic flaw which makes him unjustly targeted by all the evils of this world. For defying them, for standing up to them, for seeking them out, he is marked to be stricken down, almost like a lamb chosen to be slaughtered (another parallel with Jesus/God). "It resembled that perpendicular seam sometimes made in the straight, lofty trunk of a great tree, when the upper lightning tearingly darts down it, and without wrenching a single twig, peels and grooves out the bark from top to bottom ere running off into the soil, leaving the tree still greenly alive, but branded." This is not so much a description of what the scar/mark actually looks like as it is a deeply impressionistic comparison, which also implicitly hints at the more general, befittingly positive traits of Captain Ahab. Aside from that, being struck by lightning is a broadly accepted sign of divine disapproval. "Whether that mark was born with him, or whether it was the scar left by some desperate wound, no one could certainly say. By some tacit consent, throughout the voyage little or no allusion was made to it, especially by the mates." Not knowing the true nature of the mark, as well as the taboo associated with it, only adds fuel to the fire of mystery, opening the floodgates of all kinds of wild theories and conjectures. "But once Tashtego's senior, an old Gay-Head Indian among the crew, superstitiously asserted…" - the reliability of this account is here immediately brought into question – "…that not till he was full forty years old did Ahab become that way branded, and then it came upon him, not in the fury of any mortal fray, but in an elemental strife at sea." Forty is one of the most important biblical and symbolical numbers, in addition to seven and three. In the Bible, Jews spent forty years in the desert after escaping slavery, rain fell for forty days and forty nights during the great flood, Jesus also spent forty days and nights in the desert, and modern-day Lent lasts for forty days. From all of this, we can see that forty is a number often used to describe a period of time spent suffering and repenting, either enduring a punishment or as preparation for some holy purpose or event that is to follow. The words used, "not in the fury of any mortal fray", also suggest a higher calling or purpose. "Yet, this wild hint seemed inferentially negatived, by what a grey Manxman insinuated, an old sepulchral man, who, having never before sailed out of Nantucket, had never ere this laid eye

upon wild Ahab." Interesting here is the use of the word "sepulchral man". The word "holy man" would serve just as well, but Ishmael opts for the Gothic variant with the double meaning. The fact that the old Indian had this knowledge without ever having seen Ahab serves here to enhance the mystery. "Nevertheless, the old sea-traditions, the immemorial credulities, popularly invested this old Manxman with preternatural powers of discernment." I have previously mentioned that sailors can be notoriously superstitious. In this passage Ishmael confirms this point of view, and the narrative continues to thread that fine line between reality, imagination and superstition. "So that no white sailor seriously contradicted him when he said that if ever Captain Ahab should be tranquilly laid out-which might hardly come to pass, so he muttered-then, whoever should do that last office for the dead, would find a birth-mark on him from crown to sole." This is just another casual remark that puts Ahab in the context of being dead and spins the idea further. In the same passage it is insinuated that his death will not be "tranquil" or that there may be no body left to "lay out", basically foreshadowing future events.

The chapter continues in the same tone, emphasizing the "grim aspect of Ahab", which is evidently so significant that in the very same sentence Ishmael once again comments on his "overbearing grimness". His ivory leg is mentioned, fashioned, naturally, from the corpse of one of his enemies. The rest of Ishmael's descriptions are decidedly Romantic, even more so than the others: "I was struck with the singular posture he maintained.", and "Captain Ahab stood erect, looking straight out beyond the ship's ever-pitching prow. There was an infinity of firmest fortitude, a determinate, unsurrenderable wilfulness, in the fixed and fearless, forward dedication of that glance." This is perhaps where Ahab comes closest to Milton's Satan, as well as where his King-like qualities are most openly displayed, especially in the sentence: "Ahab stood before them with a crucifixion in his face; in all the nameless regal overbearing dignity of some mighty woe." The passage is also interesting because of its elaborate and complex wordplay that's employed here to emphasize his position as the leader, the one at the forefront. The phrasing in question: "singular", "erect", "straight out beyond", "ever-pitching prow", "fortitude", "forward" and "before them".

Following his initial appearance, Ahab is no longer secluded from his crew and Ishmael takes the time to observe him. He notices that he is burdened by something, or as he puts it, "clouds that layer upon layer were piled upon his brow, as ever all clouds choose the loftiest peaks to pile themselves upon." (Melville 110) The line serves to illustrate Ahab's stature and significance as a man of superior sentiment and discernment (and many other things). Also

interesting is the final sentence, “More than once did he put forth the faint blossom of a look, which, in any other man, would have soon flowered out in a smile.” (ibid.), which, while referencing the now no longer grim and grey weather, subtly hints that Ahab may not be as cold and as unfeeling as the initial impression of him would suggest, but at the same time also reconfirming, particularly with the phrase, “in any other man”, that he just as well may be.

The next chapter bears the title “Enter Ahab; to Him, Stubb”. In the Norton Critical Edition, it is accompanied by a particularly insightful note: “The first use in the book of stage direction, signifying Ishmael’s strategy of presenting Ahab as a tragic hero whose greatness he as a dramatist to some extent discovers and even creates” (110). However, this chapter is not only significant for its references to tragedy and Ahab’s role of the hero, but also for its abundant use of Gothic imagery and Gothic literary devices. The chapter opens up with a paragraph of essentially Romantic ideas and observations about nature and how it can inspire and enchant the soul. This continues into a short discussion about old age and the correlation between sleeping and death. It serves to basically introduce the rest of the chapter and provide reasoning behind Ahab spending every night roaming the ship’s deck. Ishmael notes that Ahab now spends more time outside than inside his cabin, and to provide some justification for it, as well as give credibility to Ishmael’s previous words, Ahab says the following: “It feels like going down into one's tomb, … for an old captain like me to be descending this narrow scuttle, to go to my grave-dug berth.” (Melville 110) These words carry a lot of significance and weight as the first words spoken by Ahab, and it is very telling that their content should be so heavily marked. It wasn’t a greeting or an introduction; it wasn’t even an order given out to someone; no, his first words are musings about tombs and death and the burden of old age. It feels almost superfluous to point out the once again repeated comparison of his cabin to a tomb, as previously mentioned, a recurrent motif within the narrative. Also, interestingly enough, Ahab’s first interaction with someone is not a neutral conversation, merely exchanging a few words or opinions. His first interaction is a confrontation, a verbal altercation with Stubb, his second mate, just like the first mention of Ahab is in the context of his strife with Moby Dick (although still unnamed). This is perfectly in line with the previously stated antagonism being a defining trait of Ahab. The precise nature and the reason for the argument between the two are of little significance. Just as is the case with Moby Dick, the cause of the insult appears to be trivial, just as Ahab’s reaction seems to be excessive. Prompted by the noise Ahab was making while pacing the deck at night, Stubb makes a joke and provokes Ahab’s rage, along with a slew of insults. Of particular interest is the following

passage: “Below to thy nightly grave; where such as ye sleep between shrouds, to use ye to the filling one at last.” (Melville 111) A modern translation would read: “Go back to your nightly grave below, where such as yourself sleep between shrouds (meaning burial linen), to get used to the burial shroud, the last one you will fill”. This is the second passage spoken by Ahab. His first words were, in much the same fashion, also about his cabin being a tomb. Even though this sentence may at first sight be quite indistinguishable from the rest of his insults, it serves to illustrate the way Ahab speaks and the overwhelming, both overt and subliminal presence of death within the narrative, including the insinuation that sleeping is a kind of preparation for death, which is what Ahab is saying here. Ahab’s words, “such as ye”, are also very indicative and offer a whole range of meanings. The first meaning would be that Ahab is somehow fundamentally different than Stubb. The second meaning would be that Ahab doesn’t sleep, or at least that he doesn’t sleep between shrouds. The third meaning, the most likely one for this sentence, based on its structure, would be that Ahab doesn’t need to get used to death.

The words that are spoken by Ahab, however, are not as eerie and as Gothic as what follows: “Ahab advanced upon him with such overbearing terrors in his aspect, that Stubb involuntarily retreated.” (ibid.) Emphasis on the word “involuntarily”, i.e. against his will. Ahab displays an almost supernatural ability to frighten, to instill fear, making Stubb back away, even though he himself cannot determine why. The effect Ahab has on Stubb is reminiscent of Ishmael’s memory from a previous chapter, where a mysterious presence or a ‘phantom’ has him under its spell, making his capacity for voluntary action uncannily diminished. This is not the only parallel between the two events, however. With it being the middle of the night, paired with entirely incomprehensible and unexplainable events, lapses in and out of consciousness and a distressed state of mind, Ishmael couldn’t quite recall whether his memory had indeed happened or was merely a dream. The same goes for Stubb. Stricken by the confrontation, Stubb starts talking to himself under his breath, and his monologue starts to resemble very closely what would later be known as stream of consciousness, just as he, still under the impression of the crazy event, slowly falls asleep. Ahab’s strange demeanor and his own reaction to it become something Stubb can’t really account for: “I was so taken aback with his brow, somehow. It flashed like a bleached bone. What the devil's the matter with me? I don't stand right on my legs. Coming afoul of that old man has a sort of turned me wrong side out. By the Lord, I must have been dreaming, though.” (112) His conclusion that it must

have been a dream enables him to deal with the strangeness of it all, but it also serves the purpose of bringing into question the validity of his account.

Another, less obvious dimension of this exchange is an allusion to an encounter with the supernatural, in which the observer usually becomes altered in one way or another, marked or even scorched by the experience. It is almost as if Stubb had been cursed by Ahab, and the curse brings with it also a very disturbing and ominous dream. In a conversation with Flask, Stubb retells his dream, which is highly symbolic, (among other things) depicting Ahab as an immovable pyramid. In essence, he dreamt that Ahab kicked him with his ivory leg. “But what was still more curious, Flask-you know how curious all dreams are-through all this rage that I was in, I somehow seemed to be thinking to myself, that after all, it was not much of an insult, that kick from Ahab.” (Melville 113) His explanation for Ahab’s kick not being insulting is the following: “It's not a real leg, only a false one.' And there's a mighty difference between a living thump and a dead thump. That's what makes a blow from the hand, Flask, fifty times more savage to bear than a blow from a cane. The living member-that makes the living insult, my little man.” (ibid.) The dream sequence was, obviously, a consequence of, as well as a warped reinterpretation of the actual encounter between Ahab and Stubb. If we choose to follow Stubb’s logic and reasoning regarding Ahab’s insults, it opens up a lot of new conclusions, as well as a new, viable allegorical reading of the novel. The basis of this reading lies in the idea that Ahab is indeed dead. If we observe Stubb’s dream and his interpretation in relation to the fight between the two the night before, we must conclude that Stubb reacted the way he did because the insults dished out by Captain Ahab came from a dead man. There are other indications that point to the same conclusion: the warnings issued by Elijah, the shadows running towards the ship (which, with the available information at this point, we must consider nothing else but dead sailors), Ahab’s cabin being repeatedly called a tomb, Stubb saying that Ahab’s brow looked like “bleached bone”, as if for an instant, Stubb got to see Ahab’s true, skeleton self, as well as the fact that Ahab didn’t show himself until they were far away from the port. If we follow through with this reading, Pequod (especially if we remember the meaning behind the name) is a haunted ship, and Ahab is the ghostly collector of souls, binding men to his will as soon as the contract is signed. He is Davy Jones and the Devil. He is an undead presence that lingers in this world because he has some unfinished business with Moby Dick. Of course, the narrative of the novel will never directly support such a reading or explicitly state any of the above conjectures. That’s not how most Gothic novels work, anyway. The majority of Gothic works will leave the readers wondering.

The episode between Ahab and Stubb stretches over two chapters, with a much shorter chapter, talking about Ahab and his pipe, interjected between the two. This smaller chapter recounts a seemingly trivial event: Ahab throwing his pipe overboard. Still, it is significant for two reasons. The first reason is expressed in the passage that reads: "In old Norse times, the thrones of the sea-loving Danish kings were fabricated, saith tradition, of the tusks of the narwhale. How could one look at Ahab then, seated on that tripod of bones, without bethinking him of the royalty it symbolized? For a Khan of the plank, and a king of the sea and a great lord of Leviathans was Ahab." (Melville, 113) Here we see Ahab sitting on an ivory stool, his throne of bones. Even more interesting, even if typical, is his comparison to royalty, in line with the literary devices employed by tragedy. Even more important to consider is the reason why he throws his pipe overboard, especially in relation to Stubb. The simple fact of the matter is, smoking no longer gives him any pleasure – it no longer soothes him. He puffs and draws nervously, but to no avail. To reuse the quote, smoking is previously said to be for Stubb "one cause, at least of his peculiar disposition; for every one knows that this earthly air, whether ashore or afloat, is terribly infected with the nameless miseries of the numberless mortals who have died exhaling it." (Melville 105) For some reason, however, the same does not work for Ahab. He cannot filter the air of its sufferings. It could be because Ahab's misery stems from within, and so nothing can filter it or soothe it. In a literary sense, the difference serves as a point of contrast between Stubb and Ahab.

The chapters dealing with their protracted exchange conclude with the first mention of a white whale, when Ahab warns the crew to keep their eyes peeled. The following chapter, "Cetology" proceeds in a different tone, even imitating the style of scientific papers and treaties. Although it doubles back every so often to use more poetic, occasionally Gothic expressions, it mostly relies on the language of taxonomy. The opening paragraph, a dire premonition and the most overt foreshadowing of events so far, is no indication of what the rest of the chapter is like, however: "Already we are boldly launched upon the deep; but soon we shall be lost in its unshored harborless immensities. Ere that come to pass; ere the Pequod's weedy hull rolls side by side with the barnacled hulls of the leviathan…" (Melville 115) After that passage, Ishmael focuses on the description and classification of whales. From today's perspective (and even from the perspective of his contemporaries), the truthfulness and didactic value of his insights is of little consequence, except when it comes to maybe one crucial detail: his choice to classify the whale as a species of fish. Whether he is objectively and scientifically right or wrong is irrelevant, but it doesn't mean that his choice is arbitrary or

unmotivated. It is motivated, but not by scientific reasoning; the decision he made serves a literary purpose. His classification makes the whale stand out as unique among the many species of fish. The whale has warm blood as opposed to cold-blooded and lungless fish. The contrast makes the whale appear particular, unusual, mysterious, supernatural and superior to other life forms in the ocean. It makes him noble, royal, passionate and unique. Through this comparison, the significance of the whale is amplified. When discussing Melville's imagery, Wright makes a similar claim: "All of Melville's writing from the realistic *Typee* onward is highly imagistic, and all of his images have an interrelationship which constantly enhances their individual effect." (20) When talking about the whale, Melville goes all out in depicting him as the pinnacle of God's creation – not even his mere size is enough to do that. Yes, the whale is a fish, but what a fish! If the whale were to be separated from the other fish, it would lose the grandeur it gains through contrast; its significance deflated when observed on its own. Also, classifying the whale as a species of fish adds another rung to the exponential procession of greatness. The sentence, "The sperm whale is the greatest of all whales" doesn't quite have the same ring as "The whale is the greatest among the fish, and the sperm whale is the greatest of all whales". The other side has its procession of greatness, too: seafaring being the noblest and most dangerous profession, whalers being the bravest and fiercest of all seamen, Nantucketers being the greatest and the most storied whalers, and Captain Ahab being the greatest and most storied among the Nantucketers.

"Cetology" leaves no doubt as to why a sperm whale is the hero-anti-hero of the novel and the titular character. It provides a vivid literary collage, an interesting mix of contemporary science and a methodological approach, paired with superstition, hearsay, religion, mythology and speculation. And even in the most factual and sometimes even tedious chapters and passages, the narrative is still interspersed with poetic allusions: "Another retiring gentleman, with a brimstone belly, doubtless got by scraping along the Tartarian tiles in some of his profounder divings." (Melville 121) There is certainly a healthy dose of irony (even satire) in these descriptions, as is indeed in a large part of the novel as a whole, and who is to say which parts are meant to be taken literally and which we are expected to laugh out loud at? At one point, Melville even spoofs Shakespeare: "But there are a rabble of uncertain, fugitive, half-fabulous whales… But I omit them as altogether obsolete; and can hardly help suspecting them for mere sounds, full of Leviathanism, but signifying nothing." (Melville 124) It is the last line of Macbeth's soliloquy from Act 5, Scene 5 of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, later also

used as the title of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. We will investigate the connection between *Moby Dick* and *Macbeth* more closely in the next chapter.

The chapters that follow "Cetology" present us with an informative and amusing insight into various peculiarities of life on a ship, as well as customs at sea. There are occasional musings on emperors, kings, sultans and Ahab. It should be pointed out that Ishmael's role as a character has become almost insignificant; as soon as the ship sets off, Ishmael disappears from the narrative and transcends his own position within the text. The descriptions of the dining table in Ahab's cabin and the various relationships between the mates serve as a good illustration of Ishmael at moments becoming an all-seeing, all-knowing narrator, perceiving things and events and providing insights that he himself as a character could not have been privy to. Flask's unfortunate position is brilliantly sad and humorous at the same time. It provides a short relief from the otherwise serious and gloomy narrative and compensates for Ahab's unrelenting solemnity, which we nevertheless come back to soon enough: "And as when Spring and Summer had departed, that wild Logan of the woods, burying himself in the hollow of a tree, lived out the winter there, sucking his own paws; so, in his inclement, howling old age, Ahab's soul, shut up in the caved trunk of his body, there fed upon the sullen paws of its gloom!" (Melville 131)

"The Mast Head" is another witty, complex chapter, very dense with literary references, including a refitted quote from Byron's Childe Harold: "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll! Ten thousand blubber-hunters sweep over thee in vain." (ibid. 135) Melville uses the occasion to poke fun at Romanticism, in particular "romantic, melancholy, and absent-minded young men", "with lean brow and hollow eye; given to unseasonable meditativeness", pitting Ishmael's apparent (in this case) industriousness and matter-of-fact utilitarianism against "this sunken-eyed young Platonist", who "will tow you ten wakes round the world, and never make you one pint of sperm the richer." This is another one of the many instances within the novel of Melville subverting literature and traditions that he himself partially relies on. These passages also serve to illustrate Melville's refined sense for irony, previously touched upon, as well as intriguing depth, found often in unexpected places.

Immediately following these musings, the narrative resumes in dramatic tone, with another piece of stage direction, "Enter Ahab: Then, all" under the chapter's title, "The Quarter-Deck". It is a crucial chapter that marks a turning point in the novel. The first passages describe Ahab's monomania, his obsession with a single idea or a thought that keeps torturing him. He gets Starbuck to assemble the men, and after a short pause, directs a series of

questions at them. The scene, as it is set, is very important: we have Ahab standing alone on one side, and all of the sailors and officers under his command on the other. Ahab's position is that of a conductor in front of an orchestra, or, which is probably a more apt comparison, of a speaker in front of a chorus in early Greek tragedies. Ahab easily succeeds in stirring the assembly, so much so that "the mariners began to gaze curiously at each other, as if marvelling how it was that they themselves became so excited at such seemingly purposeless questions." (Melville 138) In other words, Ahab shows great power over other people, over 'the masses', either supernatural or seemingly so, similar to the power he exerted over Stubb in an earlier chapter. He describes the white whale, the reason why he summoned the whole crew, and nails a gold piece, a "Spanish ounce of gold" to the main-mast, promising to give it to whoever first spots the whale in question. The harpooners are particularly affected by Ahab's words:

> All this while Tashtego, Daggoo, and Queequeg had looked on with even more intense interest and surprise than the rest, and at the mention of the wrinkled brow and crooked jaw they had started as if each was separately touched by some specific recollection. "Captain Ahab," said Tashtego, "that white whale must be the same that some call Moby Dick." (Melville 138)

This passage adds to the mystical aspect of the scene, and helps to build the aura of the uncanny that surrounds Moby Dick. The three harpooners, who are all pagans, and thus closer to the profane, esoteric and pre-modern aspects of this world, are not only the ones most affected by Ahab's words, but are also the only three members of the crew with a firsthand account of Moby Dick. The first time Moby Dick is named, it is none other than Tashtego who utters the name out loud. The underlying mystical implications stem not only from the fact that he's Indian, but also from earlier passages concerning Ahab, such as: "And yet the old squaw Tistig, at Gayhead, said that the name would somehow prove prophetic." (78) and "Tashtego's senior, an old Gay-Head Indian among the crew, superstitiously asserted that not till he was full forty years old did Ahab become that way branded." (109) In line with these quotes, there is a strong suggestion of something prophetic or in other way significant when it comes to Tashtego.

Ahab confirms that it is indeed Moby Dick that he's after and states his passionate determination to chase him "till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out." (139) His speech manages to get everyone excited and moved, except for Starbuck. The difference in opinion spurs an amazing dialogue between the two, showcasing two contrasting and irreconcilable

worldviews. Starbuck asks him, “How many barrels will thy vengeance yield thee even if thou gettest it, Captain Ahab?”, to which Ahab replies: “…let me tell thee, that my vengeance will fetch a great premium here!" "He smites his chest," whispered Stubb, "what's that for? methinks it rings most vast, but hollow." (ibid.)

The hollowness Stubb mentions is another reference to the primal lacking as the defining trait of Ahab, also symbolized by his dismembered leg. Ahab says it so himself: with this revenge, he hopes to fill that hole at the center of his being. That hollowness, in a more general sense, can be seen as representing the eternal hunger and the essential loneliness of every human being. In psychoanalytical terms, it represents desire, which can never be satisfied or, alternatively, a fundamental cleft within the ego, paired with the realization that the self is in fact, empty of all content, except as a pure Cartesian auto-referential subject.

However, it is not only Captain Ahab that is hollow. Continuing his discussion with Starbuck, he says about Moby Dick: “Sometimes I think there's naught beyond.” (140) If we take that to be true, then both Ahab and Moby Dick are nothing more than symbols. Still, the rest of Ahab’s speech challenges that point of view: “All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event-in the living act, the undoubted deed-there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask… That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him.” (ibid.) From a Christian perspective, the invisible power that sets everything in motion is none other than God. Animals in particular do not have souls as humans do, and are simply driven by instincts given to them by God. Consequently, Ahab is striking out against God, unlike Job who meekly accepts God’s trials, temptations and his mysterious ways. Although Starbuck tries to reason with him, he stands little chance as “one tost sapling amid the general hurricane”. The difference between Ahab and Starbuck again becomes apparent in that one turn of phrase: Starbuck as the hero of Realism, constrained and determined by his position, unable to rise above his particular circumstances and Ahab as the hero of Romanticism, shaping and manipulating his own circumstances at the forefront of history.

Although he cannot persuade him to willingly take his side, even after a protracted monologue, Ahab once again exerts his mysterious power to bend people to his will: “Something shot from my dilated nostrils, he has inhaled it in his lungs. Starbuck now is mine; cannot oppose me now, without rebellion.” (140) The same thing that happened to Stubb, the same thing that happened to the crew, the same loss of his ability for independent,

willful action happens to Starbuck here. Unable to resist, Starbuck cries out for God, and with him overpowered, the entire ship falls under Ahab's spell, becoming effectively an extension of himself, entirely subject to his will. The fate of the crewmembers becomes tied to Ahab's fate and the tragic events of the novel are finally and irreversibly set in motion. As a breaking point within the narrative, Starbuck's fall is accompanied by a series of mysterious omens:

> But in his joy at the enchanted, tacit acquiescence of the mate, Ahab did not hear his foreboding invocation; nor yet the low laugh from the hold; nor yet the presaging vibrations of the winds in the cordage; nor yet the hollow flap of the sails against the masts, as for a moment their hearts sank in. For again Starbuck's downcast eyes lighted up with the stubbornness of life; the subterranean laugh died away; the winds blew on; the sails filled out; the ship heaved and rolled as before. Ah, ye admonitions and warnings! why stay ye not when ye come? But rather are ye predictions than warnings, ye shadows! (141)

The words "enchanted, tacit acquiescence" in particular carry a lot of weight. What Ahab is doing is unnatural. He is dragging everyone into his own personal rebellion against God, driven by his blasphemy, arrogance and stubbornness. The bad omens, indicating that the crew is damned, appear primarily because in obeying Ahab, they have placed him above God, in a sense worshiping him and breaking the First Commandment "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." This brings us back to Father Mapple's words from chapter 9: "Delight,-top-gallant delight is to him, who acknowledges no law or lord, but the Lord his God, and is only a patriot to heaven. Delight is to him, whom all the waves of the billows of the seas of the boisterous mob can never shake from this sure Keel of the Ages." (54) There's no delight, however, for anyone on the Pequod, not even for Starbuck, since he is merely "one tost sapling" and cannot resist "the boisterous mob".

To mark the crew's absolute surrender to his will and their dedication to his own cause, Ahab performs an unholy ritual. He comes up with a series of ceremonial rites, after which everyone drinks grog, "hot as Satan's hoof". "Commend the murderous chalices! Bestow them, ye who are now made parties to this indissoluble league." (142) – says Ahab, closing the chapter with what is essentially a blood-covenant.

The chapters that follow, "Sunset", "Dusk", "First Night-Watch" and "Forecastle-Midnight" (numbers 37, 38, 39 and 40) are delivered in a completely different style compared to the rest of the novel. Melville uses dramatic literary devices, including stage directions and

commentary in parentheses. Together with “The Quarter-Deck. Ahab and All”, these chapters form a miniature play in five acts. “Sunset”, “Dusk” and “First Night-Watch” are basically monologues by Ahab, Starbuck and Stubb respectively, while “Forecastle-Midnight” represents a dramatic reenactment of a revelry. Ahab’s thoughts, “This lovely light, it lights not me; all loveliness is anguish to me, since I can ne'er enjoy. Gifted with the high perception, I lack the low, enjoying power; damned, most subtly and most malignantly! damned in the midst of Paradise!” (143), are reminiscent of Satan’s “The mind is its own place, and in itself Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.” from Book 1 of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. In his own monologue, Starbuck contemplates the nature of this power Ahab has over him: “Will I, nill I, the ineffable thing has tied me to him; tows me with a cable I have no knife to cut. Horrible old man!” (144) Although he realizes that Ahab’s quest is blasphemous, he still feels compelled to help him. He feels pity for him; that such a great man should be driven to such extremes, and yet he feels that there is some “lurid woe” in Ahab that could ruin a lesser man. In “First Night-Watch”, Stubb assumes the role of the jester. He spends some time thinking about Starbuck and Ahab, too: “Starbuck then looked something as I the other evening felt. Be sure the old Mogul has fixed him, too.” (145) Meanwhile, the revelry in the forecastle represents the culmination of all this madness, reflected also in the storm that is approaching in the night.

The following chapter, “Moby Dick”, provides us with a bit of backstory and also retells various legends surrounding Moby Dick. The words used to describe him amplify the Gothic atmosphere: “haunted those uncivilized seas”, “the peculiar terror he bred”, “appallingly astonishing”, “morbid hints”, “suggestions of supernatural agencies”, “athirst for human blood”, etc. Particularly striking is the following passage, about sperm whales in general:

> For in his Natural History, the Baron himself affirms that at sight of the Sperm Whale, all fish (sharks included) are "struck with the most lively terrors," and "often in the precipitancy of their flight dash themselves against the rocks with such violence as to cause instantaneous death." And however the general experiences in the fishery may amend such reports as these; yet in their full terribleness, even to the bloodthirsty item of Povelson, the superstitious belief in them is, in some vicissitudes of their vocation, revived in the minds of the hunters. (154)

Although Ishmael talks about these stories as mere superstitions, the fact remains that they are here, included as one part of the narrative. If there had been no value or merit in them, he could have simply omitted them and focused on the facts. This little contradiction can be

explained very easily: Ishmael is a whaleman, too. Here's what he says about sailors and whalemen: "ignorance and superstitiousness hereditary to all sailors", "the whaleman is wrapped by influences all tending to make his fancy pregnant with many a mighty birth" and "some whalemen should go still further in their superstitions" (all in just this one chapter). Being a sailor himself, Ishmael does give some credit to the beliefs that make up this chapter. As our narrator, he does not merely discredit the rumors; while undermining the overblown stories on the one hand, he also feeds the legend by talking about them. It is more than just an illustration; he always dances on the edge of some of it possibly being true – by mixing rumors and superstitions with scientific observations and with empirical knowledge from real-life encounters. All of these layers are present in the novel at the same time and they intertwine to form the narrative. Everything is at our fingertips, with various aspects of the story brought to the forefront, half-discredited and half-confirmed by the narrator in the same paragraph.

The last superstitions mentioned are also at the same time the most incredible; namely, that Moby Dick may have the power to be in more than one place at the same time and that he may be immortal.

The rest of the chapter deals with the previous encounter between Ahab and Moby Dick and Ahab's unquenchable thirst for revenge. There are several passages that indicate that Ahab's feud with Moby Dick transcends his own particular situation and touches upon some general grievances shared by humanity as a whole: "He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down" (156), as well as:

> How it was that they so aboundingly responded to the old man's ire—by what evil magic their souls were possessed, that at times his hate seemed almost theirs; the White Whale as much their insufferable foe as his; how all this came to be—what the White Whale was to them, or how to their unconscious understandings, also, in some dim, unsuspected way, he might have seemed the gliding great demon of the seas of life… (158)

Even if we set aside the obvious Gothic imagery, mentioning "evil magic" and using the metaphor of possessed souls to talk about the crewmen's deep connection and empathy for Ahab's plight, the most important image still remains, "the gliding great demon of the seas of life". In this one long sentence we have two fundamentally different forms of the Gothic within this novel. On the one hand, we have the almost playful and barely even half-serious

insinuation or metaphor of Ahab as some kind of undead sorcerer. It is a superficial kind of Gothic, on the same level as the continual use of words such as "grim", "gloomy" and "coffin". It adds a certain dark flair to the novel and makes the character of Ahab more engaging and mysterious. What it boils down to is something Crow called "a narrow tradition bound by certain props (ruined castles, usually in foreign lands, and imperiled maidens)" (2). But the Gothic is more than that. This new, more complex dimension of the Gothic looms in this passage, "a tradition of oppositional literature, presenting in disturbing, usually frightening ways, a skeptical, ambiguous view of human nature and of history." (ibid.) "The gliding great demon of the seas of life" suggests that there is something inherently dark and frightening about the human condition, about our place in the world. It opens up new themes of inherent, inescapable hopelessness of life and the cruel and uncaring nature of the higher spheres, be it God, Providence, or the Universe.

The chapter that follows, "The Whiteness of the Whale", expounds upon these themes and marks the novel's transition from the more superficial form of the Gothic, one that relies on language and narrative, to a more profound variety, held up by its somber, philosophical and at times (especially from a Christian perspective) controversial themes. Both types of the Gothic are still very much present, however, and there is a great deal of interplay between the two. The opening parts of the chapter take the color white, usually seen as a positive color, a symbol of innocence and benevolence, and describe it using markedly Gothic terms: "vague, nameless horror", "appalled", "lurks", "panic to the soul", "ghostliness", "silent stillness of death", "spiritual wonderment", "pale dread", "white phantom", "supernaturalism, "pallor of the dead", "shroud", "ghosts riding in a milk-white fog", "spectralness" and "the shrouded phantom". To make his point, the narrator even evokes Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,* itself a Gothic poem. The correlation runs deeper than it might seem initially, since in the poem, the albatross, which is usually considered a sign of good luck (just like white generally carries positive connotations), becomes a source of misery and torment. And although the imagery and references used make it obvious that the color white has this uncanny aspect to it, they are often accompanied by a question: "Why is it so?" In a series of passages that focus on the themes that these considerations suggest, the narrative transitions from descriptions of external impressions and the effects the color white in its various embodiments can have, to deep, subconscious, real reasons why the color is so frightening. This inmost fear comes from "the instinct of the knowledge of the demonism in the world." (164) But what does that demonism entail? On the one hand, it may seem that the fear is

simply the fear of the unknown: “Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright.” (ibid.) Still, the same sentence also suggests that there is something to be feared there. The whole closing paragraph is incredibly compelling, beginning with the question, “why, as we have seen, it is at once the most meaning symbol of spiritual things, nay, the very veil of the Christian's Deity; and yet should be as it is, the intensifying agent in things the most appalling to mankind.” (165) Which white are we talking when we’re dealing with the white whale? Is Moby Dick “the very veil of the Christian’s Deity” or “the intensifying agent in things the most appalling”? Or is he both? Can it be that the white of God is also the white of dread; that God himself is malevolent, unfathomable, dreadful and fear-instilling? The answer, of course, is yes, but the question that Melville really asks is, could it be that there is no God? The blankness, the emptiness that we ascribe to this white symbolism of spirituality and God could stand for nothing but the frank absence of anything beyond - anything but final annihilation. In this way, Melville touches upon the very depth of mankind’s existential fears. If the white symbolism of God truly signifies nothing but absence, then Moby Dick is also nothing but oblivion haunting and chasing after each and every one of us; empty, dumb and unreasoning, relentless and incomprehensible. It is the ultimate primal fear, with the feud between Ahab and Moby Dick becoming the very feud between mankind and our own inevitable, impending mortality, and Ahab bearing the burden of all the hatred accumulated since Adam, all the blind, helpless rage at the thought that we must perish.

Here’s the full quote, since Melville says it better:

> Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the white depths of the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color; and at the same time the concrete of all colors; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows-a colorless, all-color of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues-every stately or lovely emblazoning-the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtile deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; (165)

"Charnel-house" (as in morgue, deadhouse) as the only thing behind nature's counterfeit mask; "voids", "immensities", "annihilation", "depth", "absence", "atheism from which we shrink" – the pessimism of this passage is shocking! It is not only Ahab's broad chest that is hollow; everything is hollow, everything is without substance, everything is an illusion, everything – haunted by an absolute absence of meaning.

In order to avoid or at least reduce excessive repetition, I opted to skip the unnecessary details and particularities of the following chapters. Suffice to say that "the five dusky phantoms", or "subordinate phantoms" that made up the crew of Ahab's boat make their first appearance in "The Mat-Maker". Fedallah is also introduced for the first time, followed by descriptions that hint at his evil/satanic nature. He becomes a staple of the novel, characterized almost like a demon with whom Ahab forged an unholy alliance.

"The Spirit Spout" and "The Albatross" are filled with unusual, mysterious events. Strange forms appear in the water, including the ghostly spout that leads them on in the night. Flocks of birds come to rest on the Pequod, which plays with the whole idea of it being a ghost ship or a ship of the damned. When another ship comes close, shoals of small, harmless fish leave Pequod's side and join the stranger, unexpectedly causing Ahab a considerable degree of sadness.

"The Town-Ho's Story" carries a lot of weight as another mystical element within the narrative spoken by Tashtego. He divulged a part of the story in his sleep, and the crew made him retell the rest. It is also interesting for referring to Moby Dick as a "most deadly immortal monster" (211) and for presenting the events that unfolded as directed by some karmic hand of destiny (here dubbed 'fatality'): "Yet complete revenge he had, and without being the avenger. For by a mysterious fatality, Heaven itself seemed to step in to take out of his hands into its own the damning thing he would have done." (211), in addition to "Gentlemen, a strange fatality pervades the whole career of these events, as if verily mapped out before the world itself was charted." (212) Parallels can easily be drawn between "The Town-Ho's Story" and *Moby Dick* the novel, thus suggesting that the events in the novel are just as predetermined, adding to the sense of hopelessness and inevitability.

Chapter 61, "Stubb kills a Whale", is notable for its beautiful prose describing the calm, sultry day upon the open ocean – but the serene atmosphere is soon cut short by the chase, at first calm and cautious, then passionate and frantic, culminating with a pretty disturbing description of the kill. It is one of the most engaging chapters in the novel, not only because of

the action, but also due to the poetic descriptions and the subtle connotations of deeply-felt emotions which are hinted at, but never explicitly described. The portrayal of the whale's last moments is particularly vivid and moving: "And now abating in his flurry, the whale once more rolled out into view; surging from side to side; spasmodically dilating and contracting his spout-hole, with sharp, cracking, agonized respirations." (233) The chapters that follow describe in great detail what happens with the whale once he's killed. "The Funeral" concludes this symphony of death, the protracted, elaborate description of savagery, of killing and of butchering; it is the business of death, of stripping the corpses of magnificent creatures as a livelihood and as a calling. This, as the very chapter indicates, is a story about undertakers who, corpses themselves, turn monsters into corpses upon the wide sea, which is both their home and their grave. Even the "technical" chapters scream death and reek of unseemly brutality depicted as normal, everyday events. Described in such great detail, the whole business of whaling descends into absurdity. In a subsequent chapter, there is a heavy dose of irony and criticism directed towards the hypocrisy of man: "But pity there was none. For all his old age, and his one arm, and his blind eyes, he must die the death and be murdered, in order to light the gay bridals and other merry-makings of men, and also to illuminate the solemn churches that preach unconditional inoffensiveness by all to all." (282) The line about unconditional inoffensiveness is followed by another vivid description of the whale rolling in his own blood. It all seems meaningless and cruel, and the contrast between the serene, poetic scenery and the grotesque depictions of death makes the scene of "the funeral" even more startling: "For hours and hours from the almost stationary ship that hideous sight is seen. Beneath the unclouded and mild azure sky, upon the fair face of the pleasant sea, waited by the joyous breezes, that great mass of death floats on and on, till lost in infinite perspectives." (247)

Talking to the suspended head of the whale in "The Sphynx", Ahab touches upon some of these subjects, saying that "in her murderous hold this frigate earth is ballasted with bones of millions of the drowned" (249). It is a dark, dangerous world; the earth itself is cruel. Death, though inevitable, is often ignored. Only in certain walks of life, such as whaling, is it in the foreground, so much so that it becomes an everyday occurrence. Whaling as seen in *Moby Dick* is not a niche profession depicted in a Gothic way; what we are dealing with here is the universal horror of life, the omnipresent macabre all around us and awaiting all of us. The "thunder-clouds" on Ahab's brow point to the fact that he can see the true nature of the world, unlike Stubb, who filters it with a pipe.

“The Try-Works” ends a series of vibrant, rich and diverse chapters with almost psychedelic descriptions of the furnaces, the boiling oil, the stench of black smoke and the blackened faces of sailors in the night, a living image of Hell:

> As they narrated to each other their unholy adventures, their tales of terror told in words of mirth; as their uncivilized laughter forked upwards out of them, like the flames from the furnace; as to and fro, in their front, the harpooneers wildly gesticulated with their huge pronged forks and dippers; as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Pequod , freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul. (327)

The insanity of the scene and the sudden gloom that overcomes Ishmael prompt a short discussion about the significance of these dark thoughts as opposed to carefree, unreasoning joy. Ishmael’s argument is firmly on the side of darkness: “So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true-not true, or undeveloped.” (328) When he’s contemplating his own miseries brought about by his splintered ivory leg, Ahab’s thoughts betray a similar sentiment in “Ahab’s Leg”, with the idea that “even the highest earthly felicities ever have a certain unsignifying pettiness lurking in them, but, at bottom, all heartwoes, a mystic significance, and, in some men, an archangelic grandeur” (355). Ahab even believes that the gods must be unhappy themselves.

Since he needs to have his ivory leg replaced, Ahab visits the carpenter and gets into a prolonged discussion with him, saying, among other things, that man belongs in Hell since he was forged in fire (referring to Prometheus). Ahab’s fanciful idea of what man should be like is also very curious: “no heart at all, brass forehead, and about a quarter of an acre of fine brains; and let me see-shall I order eyes to see outwards? No, but put a sky-light on top of his head to illuminate inwards.” (359) The idea Ahab is playing with is not merely anchored in imitating God and mimicking his creation. Ahab starts with the blasphemous belief that he could do better. When clay is mentioned, referencing God’s creation of Adam, the carpenter says “That’s mud; we leave clay to ditchers, sir.” (ibid.)

Many of the chapters that precede the final confrontation with Moby Dick focus on a multilayered portrayal of Ahab. In the same vein as the episode with the carpenter, in "The Forge", Ahab questions the blacksmith, too, in particular his acceptance of suffering without going mad. The rest of the chapter is delivered in the tradition of epic literature: the forging and the portrayal of the hero's weapon. It concludes with another dark ritual, as Ahab's harpoon is tempered with the blood of the three 'heathens' (Tashtego, Queequeg, Dagoo) and baptized in the name of the Devil.

In "The Whale Watch", Fedallah speaks about his prophetic visions, saying that Ahab cannot die before he sees two hearses on the sea, "the first not made by mortal hands; and the visible wood of the last one must be grown in America." (377) Ahab interprets this, along with the other prophecy spoken by Fedallah, that only hemp can kill him, as something that can never be fulfilled, believing that he's, in essence, immortal. A similar misinterpretation of prophecies can be found in *Macbeth* and, prior to that, *Oedipus the King*. The supernatural prophecies push the narrative almost into the realm of fantasy. The chapters that follow are filled with unusual and marvelous events. In "The Candles", the ship gets caught up in a powerful typhoon. All three masts are struck by lightning and burn like candles, illuminating the ship. The three harpooners, the godless savages who gave their blood to consecrate Ahab's harpoon, look almost demonic in the unnatural light:

> Relieved against the ghostly light, the gigantic jet negro, Daggoo, loomed up to thrice his real stature, and seemed the black cloud from which the thunder had come. The parted mouth of Tashtego revealed his shark-white teeth, which strangely gleamed as if they too had been tipped by corpusants; while lit up by the preternatural light, Queequeg's tattooing burned like Satanic blue flames on his body. (381)

Ahab speaks to the fire, expressing his defiance, and at last grabs the ship's lightning rods, letting the lightning run through him. This chapter is the culmination of all the hints throughout the novel of there being something supernatural in relation to Ahab.

The storm continues, and the disturbances cause the ship's compass to stop functioning, again making it seem like there's some unnatural power steering them away from their quest.

The bad omens just keep piling on. In "The Life-Buoy", they hear eerie cries in the night, which they take to be either mermaids or voices of newly drowned men in the sea. In the same chapter, a sailor falls down from the main-mast, and the life-buoy they throw overboard sinks to the bottom together with him. The new life-buoy is fashioned from Queequeg's coffin. In

"The Hat", a sea hawk takes Ahab's hat as he ascends to the top of the mainmast in a basket. When they meet the Delight, a corpse they throw overboard after a fatal encounter with Moby Dick 'baptizes' the Pequod: "…some of the flying bubbles might have sprinkled her hull with their ghostly baptism." (404)

This buildup of suspense comes to a halt in "The Symphony", a beautiful chapter exemplifying Melville's absolute mastery of pacing. After a long search, during which Ahab ignored all warnings and disregarded all portents, the narrative enters a period of respite. In this final moment of reflection before the long-awaited clash with Moby Dick, Ahab is finally revealed as a person, a human being: "From beneath his slouched hat Ahab dropped a tear into the sea; nor did all the Pacific contain such wealth as that one wee drop." (405) He opens up to Starbuck and we learn about his loneliness and the cruel reality of his life:

> On such a day-very much such a sweetness as this-I struck my first whale-a boy-harpooneer of eighteen! Forty-forty-forty years ago!-ago! Forty years of continual whaling! forty years of privation, and peril, and storm-time! forty years on the pitiless sea! for forty years has Ahab forsaken the peaceful land, for forty years to make war on the horrors of the deep! (ibid.)

Apart from the symbolism of the number forty, previously touched upon, this passage serves as a harsh, bitter metaphor of the absurdity of life and its dark fatality. "Why this strife of the chase? why weary, and palsy the arm at the oar, and the iron, and the lance? how the richer or better is Ahab now?" (406)

The last chapters describe the chase and the ensuing battle with Moby Dick. Three chapters, three days, and three times Ahab descried Moby Dick's spout, just like Peter denied Jesus three times. Unlike the chapters that were leading up to this final confrontation, which were filled with dark omens and premonitions, in the chapters that describe the chase, it is exactly the opposite: "What a lovely day again! were it a new-made world, and made for a summer-house to the angels, and this morning the first of its throwing open to them, a fairer day could not dawn upon that world." (419) And in the midst of such a heavenly scene, Fedallah's prophecy comes true: his own dismembered corpse tied to Moby Dick as the first hearse, and the Pequod sinking with all her crew as the second one. In his last monologue, Ahab cries "Oh, lonely death on lonely life!", before the line of his own unholy harpoon, stuck in Moby Dick's side, catches him around the neck and drags him down.

The last sentence reads: “Now small fowls flew screaming over the yet yawning gulf; a sullen white surf beat against its steep sides; then all collapsed, and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” (427)

The tragedy of the scene is contrasted with the uncaring sea and the ever-smiling sun. We as readers are supposed to be enraged at this: “Judge, then, to what pitches of inflamed, distracted fury the minds of his more desperate hunters were impelled, when amid the chips of chewed boats, and the sinking limbs of torn comrades, they swam out of the white curds of the whale's direful wrath into the serene, exasperating sunlight, that smiled on, as if at a birth or a bridal.” (156) This is a crucial quote. For all that happened, the world does not care. The great cogs of this universe just keep on turning. Moby Dick doesn’t care, either- there’s no difference to him between Ahab and all the other men he dragged down.

To wrap it all up somewhat, I believe it is hard to argue that *Moby Dick* is a Gothic novel. In reality, it is much more nuanced and complex than that. While focused on the Gothic elements, I have been forced to leave out or ignore innumerable significant and insightful scenes, dialogues and observations. However, I do believe that there is enough material to support a Gothic reading of the novel, if merely as just one of many possible perspectives and approaches. After reading just the last chapter, hardly anyone should fail to see how Gothic the novel is on a more apparent, surface level, with the symbolism of the two hearses and the coffin being a life buoy – suggesting, in a way, that death is the only way out. But it is the fatalism and hopelessness of the last chapter that really seal the deal for me. My first encounter with *Moby Dick* was through a special edition of *Alan Ford*[3], in which the characters adapt the novel and perform it on stage. In the comic book version, Ishmael is not saved by another ship, but ends up on a deserted island next to the corpse of Moby Dick, washed ashore. In a humorous turn of events, Ishmael cuts up Moby Dick and sells him in small cans, starting an enterprise and becoming a wealthy industrialist. Although the last part was an obvious addition, until reading the actual novel, I believed that *Moby Dick* ended with both Ahab’s and Moby Dick’s deaths.

To my surprise, in the novel the monster survives. What does this mean? On a surface level, this is the way every horror story ends: with a hint that evil still endures in this world. But in *Moby Dick*, it’s so much more than that, since Moby Dick was never defeated. He wasn’t even

[3] Alan Ford is an Italian comic book series about a group of bumbling characters who work for Group TNT, a secret spy agency. It is mostly an ironic take on American life or, more generally, on life, society, the economy, social justice etc. in general. Very popular in Croatia.

close to being defeated. On a deeper level, the act of reading the novel is as equally hopeless as Ahab's quest, as life itself. After a chapter designed to make us sympathize with him, the man we cheer for loses. We as readers lose. Humanity loses. That is the tragedy of it, and that is what is truly Gothic about the novel.

3. Ahab, Abhuman, America

When talking about the role of rogues, jesters, and fools in a novel, Mikhail Bakhtin theorized: „If we were to drop a historical sinker into these characters to sound how far back they go, we would run out of line before reaching the bottom of any of them" (*O romanu,* 277)[4]. The idea that he's advocating is that certain characters, certain archetypes predate not only literature as we now know it, but also the written word. However, it may be worth our while to make a simple distinction: While we may seek out the origins of the gothic hero, Captain Ahab is inextricably linked to the novel *Moby Dick*, and as such, he does not exist nor can he be studied outside that text. Although the focus of this paper is on one character, if we were to ask the question which one takes precedence, the hero or the text, we would be missing the point in more than one way. While a character is in no way independent of the text, nor can he be distilled and separated from it, what we can do is recognize a set of character traits, or broad types which form the basic skeleton of a character, an essential paradigm which, from one point of view, serves to construct a narrative around it, or, from another point of view, which is selected and serves to fulfill a role in a narrative. In specific literary texts, the basic skeleton assimilates the specificities of the text itself, it makes concessions to various conventions, and only then can it be recognized as a more-or-less temporally and culturally bound specific type, for example that of the Gothic hero, even though the roots may go much deeper. In such a way, any character is in fast a synthesis of basic, almost ahistorical types and the specific conventions tied to a genre or a certain period. What I'm getting at is, in the pursuit of determining what Ahab is made of, we are also exploring *Moby Dick* on the one hand, and the paradigm or the type as it is tied to other cultural products throughout history as well.

When looking at Captain Ahab, what type are we dealing with exactly? In the opening part of the previous chapter, concerning *Moby Dick's* ties with the tradition of the epic, we referenced Bloom, who called him a "Promethean defier" (xiv), as opposed to Macbeth, who

[4] The source was in Croatian. Like other sources in languages other than English, it was translated by me directly.

leans much more clearly towards the villain half of the hero-villain character amalgam. In relation to the antithetical nature of his quest (and in line with the antagonistic nature of Ahab we have discussed previously), he compares him to the biblical Jacob and Homer's Achilles. An earlier biblical reference, predating Jacob, presents us with Cain and Abel, who can be seen as the two core characters of literature, a notion which can be further extended to the contrast between Jesus and Satan; one meek, accepting, turning the other cheek, and the other one rebellious, angry and vengeful. It also opens up new possibilities of exploring evil and the nature of evil in literature. These two character archetypes are even older than Cain and Abel, and we may see variations of them in the conflict between Achilles and Hector: where one is marked by destiny, inherently great, unquestionably superior, but also destined to fail; while the other is self-sacrificing, a good father, a good son, a good husband and a good leader. Their dichotomy is reflected even in their very names. While Hector means 'holding fast' or 'he who holds everything together', Achilles carries the simple meaning of 'grief' (see Nagy, ch. 5), in the same vein as the ominous name of Ahab. Hector would later become the precursor of the Christian, chivalrous hero (whose qualities are most evident in Jesus), while Achilles, the traditional hero of epic poetry, remained true to the Satanic-like nature of his now pagan origins. If we look at these two types as principles, the Christian principle is exemplified by modesty, obedience, servitude (especially in the Middle Ages with chivalric romance and the notion of courtly love), homeliness, self-sacrifice, devotion, asceticism, abstinence, spirituality, love and femininity, while the other, the Satanic principle, which we may also call the selfish principle, contrasts the former with notions such as glory or personal renown, power, strength, self-actualization, personal interests, desire, sexuality, passion, and raw masculinity. Even in contemporary popular culture, that's the basic difference between the Jedi and the Sith, the forces of (conventionally speaking) good and evil in the *Star Wars* universe, although it is much more complex than that. We can expand this idea further to incorporate the way we understand the relationship between the self (or Ego) and the other/otherness (or, more broadly, society). Furthermore, the understanding of that relationship forms the basis of the difference between left-wing and right-wing politics. While one type seeks to be actualized within the self, the other seeks to be actualized through the other. While I'm trying to propose here two divergent tendencies of characters in myths, literature and other modes of cultural production, I'm also perhaps inadvertently robbing Freud. As it relates to psychoanalysis, Freud dubbed two such driving forces of the human psyche the 'pleasure principle' and the 'reality principle'. While the pleasure principle is almost childish in its need for an immediate satisfaction of its desires, the reality principle is

more calculating. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud states that, even though the pleasure principle is primary, "from the point of view of the self-preservation of the organism among the difficulties of the external world, it is from the very outset inefficient and even highly dangerous." (220) Its most interesting aspect is its inherent destructiveness, even to the integrity of the subject, as Freud puts it: "The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts" (ibid 268), which relates to *Moby Dick* in more than one way.

In a broader sense, if we dare to push the notions further away from Freud, as they're presented in cultural artefacts, these two modes of agency can be seen as contrasting archetypes of traditional femininity and masculinity. The principle relying on the other is thus in a way a motherly principle, a female principle in the evolutionary sense, since the archetype of the mother puts the wellbeing of her child in front of her own interests, which enables the survival of her offspring.

The self-principle is the male sexual principle, the principle of the lions who slaughter the cubs sired by other males, the principle that favors leadership more than community, that relies on personality cults and individual strength, on the alpha deer to maximize the chances of a numerous and strong progeny.

The principle of the other is a humane, altruistic principle, while the principle of the self is an animalistic, 'Homo homini lupus' principle, the principle of the frontier, the principle that exists where no civilization is present, the principle we see in wars, revolutions and western movies. Ishmael explains how the same holds true for whale-hunters, as well: "Long exile from Christendom and civilization inevitably restores a man to that condition in which God placed him, i.e. what is called savagery. Your true whale-hunter is as much a savage as an Iroquois." (Melville 222) And while the principle of the self is instrumental in building societies and creating the conditions for the human way of life (frontiers), at the same time, the inner, day-to-day workings of societies are based on the principle of the other; civilization itself is based on it, on giving to others, on mutual support. All of these things are preconditions for successful life in a community. Since man is a social animal, the principle of the other can be seen as a prerequisite for humanity, where the community provides the support for the individual and vice-versa. But once society is established, there is no more room for the unsavory principles upon which it was built. On the one hand, society does not like to be reminded how it got there, how it came to be, but also, more importantly, for it to survive, the female/communal principle is needed, not the selfish masculine principle.

And while it may not be a stark contrast as much as a sliding scale, a character whose actions are based on the principle of the self is quintessentially Gothic in this sense that he exhibits

his dark, animalistic, subconscious nature, especially if it happens within what is supposed to be the realm of society or home, or any environment really that should be familiar and friendly. In this sense, it's not only Moby Dick that symbolizes the unstoppable force of nature, the Gothic fear of the unknown, but it's also Captain Ahab: the unknown that comes from within, not without. He and Moby Dick are one and the same, being equals and opposites at the same time. That is the basis of this novel's conflict; two forces of nature going against one another, and neither will budge. Seemingly, there is no way out.

In *Benito Cereno*, the underlying principal fear is the same: things that are supposed to be under our control, things we are supposed to be superior to, things that we are supposed to understand – they all eventually come back to bite us, suddenly becoming unknown, incomprehensible and uncontrollable. The real danger of the Gothic does not lie as much in failing to know or control the other; it comes not only from the fear of nature and what's out there in the world, but, more than that, it lies in the nature within, in the dark recesses of the self - what lies stowed away in the 'attic', roaming the corridors of our home when darkness sets in. It is seen in the very opening chapter of *Moby Dick*, where going out to sea is seen by Ishmael as a way of "Driving off the spleen" (18), or dealing with his ill humor before he goes "knocking people's hats off" (ibid.). It is darkness within his soul, the principle of the self or animalistic nature that threatens to undermine society. As Miller states, "Ishmael reveals, in the very midst of humanity, an emotional and moral isolation, from which in the progress of his sea voyage he is to emerge; the story's movement for Ishmael is away from independence and solitude toward interdependence and involvement." (78) And while that may hold true for Ishmael, it is definitely not so for Ahab. The dangers that these forces pose are more than real. The selfish, monomaniacal aspect of human nature holds a great deal of appeal and charisma; it has the power to inspire and to lead, making people gravitate towards it. In the fictional world, we see the consequences of such an appeal for example in *Paradise Lost*, apart from *Moby Dick*, which we are mainly preoccupied here. In the real world, the unfolding of such a scenario has been most notably exemplified with the tragedy of fascism, with inevitable disaster on the horizon not only (or even not primarily) for those who are on the outside, but also for those who let themselves be led and inspired by subconscious yearnings and desires embodied; those who do not realize that some aspects of the inner workings of human nature are not supposed to be expressed and pursued. In the centuries that preceded the writing of *Moby Dick*, the political turmoil in Great Britain and in Europe in general, such as the Reformation in England and the French Revolution, the imperial ambitions of Napoleon that followed, as well as the American Revolution, all redefined the roles of the individual and

society and questioned the authority and power of one person (rulers, kings) as opposed to the democratic system, which was still relatively novel. The idea that individuals need to be governed and that they should surrender their freedoms to those who are better suited to be in power (either by inherent natural gifts or by divine decree) has been dominant throughout human history and was still pretty much alive and kicking in Melville's time, when his contemporary, Thomas Carlyle, wrote in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History:* "Find in any country the Ablest Man that exists there; raise him to the supreme place, and loyally reverence him: you have a perfect government for that country; no ballot-box, parliamentary eloquence, voting, constitution-building, or other machinery whatsoever can improve it a whit. It is in the perfect state; an ideal country." (279)

These ideas were in line with the famous proclamation Hobbes made in *Leviathan:* "Hereby it is manifest that, during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of every man against every man." (84) However, this view of society and human nature did not go unchallenged. Its most famous critic was without a doubt Jean Jacques Rousseau. "He went on to affirm that while primitive man in the distant past had been 'naturally good' and free, the present order of society made men increasingly vile and unhappy. Man must somehow strive to win back 'the rights of nature' and the 'primordial equality' he had once enjoyed." (Rousseau xiv)

It is the quintessential question of true human nature. Is man essentially good or evil? Do culture and civilization corrupt or bring forth and foster the good in humanity? What is the natural state of human beings?

Basically, the contraposition of the individual, society, wilderness and savagery is a 17th and 18th century invention, which unsurprisingly arose soon after Europeans "blindly plunged like fate into the lone Atlantic" (Melville 96) and encountered the big Other for the first time. These problems get even further complicated in the 19th century when they touch upon the idea of race and slavery. In a section titled "We are not the beings we think ourselves to be", Crow discusses the letters written by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecœur in his *Letters From an American Farmer*. He proposes that "These views are the earliest full articulation of the optimistic creed of American progress and exceptionalism that underlies the actions of Americans, and America, to the present day. American values are inherently virtuous, carry with them all that was right in earlier European culture, while purged of European error and corruption." (23) However, in Letter IX, faced with the brutality of slavery (a man left in a cage in the woods, his eyes plucked out by birds), Crèvecœur presents a disillusioned view of human nature, starkly opposed to his previous optimism. Crow notes that "In such a world, it

is folly to believe in progress, folly to believe that Americans are different from other peoples. Here is a sad renunciation of this illusion" (24)

The Enlightenment thus gave birth to the Gothic, but not in the sense that the Gothic was based on or expanded upon the ideas of Enlightenment. Quite the contrary, it expressed an anti-rationalistic and anti-modern sentiment as a reaction to it. As Botting argues, "Gothic fascination with a past of chivalry, violence, magical beings, and malevolent aristocrats is bound up with the shifts from feudal to commercial practices in which notions of property, government and society were undergoing massive transformations." (14)

Some of these contrasted ideas about human nature have continued beyond their inception in the Enlightenment and can be seen in the ideological falling-out between Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich within the school of psychoanalysis, explored in Part 3 of BBC's television documentary series *The Century of the Self*. The same question is repeated, though slightly different: Is the unconscious good? This schism between society and primal instincts leaves us wondering whether man is naturally good and society bad or whether it is vice-versa. What is essential human nature? Where Freud saw an uncontrolled, violent, raging inferno of emotion, Reich recognized the consequences of not permitting the original impulses to express themselves. The discussion is centered on libido and sexual energy, which is also instrumental to our understanding of the Gothic. In his *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud launches an attack on the idea that civilization represents an expression of human progress. Instead, according to Freud, civilization has been constructed to control the dangerous animal forces inside human beings. Can you trust the savage you are sleeping with? According to Freud, no. The idea of individual freedom becomes impossible from this point of view, as human beings must always be controlled and thus always remain discontent. This alienation and suffering is at the heart of Gothic literature. Man doesn't want to be civilized. Man doesn't want to be civilized, but it is necessary for survival, so man must be discontent. The idea of equality of man also goes out the window.

While analyzing Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Carol Margaret Davison identified a "trinity of themes" that would remain "strikingly intact over centuries in the Gothic tradition". (56) She's referring to the "three principal themes of power politics, identity and inheritance" (ibid.). These connections with Freud rely primarily on the first two themes, although the links between Freud and the Gothic are much more often drawn in reference to his 1919 essay, *The Uncanny* (*Das Unheimlische)* and his seminal work *The Interpretation of Dreams*, with, as Michelle A. Massé argues, "its emphasis upon symbolization, manifest and latent content, dream-work, and a central 'wish'" (310). When talking about Ahab, this 'wish' becomes

particularly interesting, since in Freud's early work, it is a "heartfelt desire which, when forbidden, will struggle its way to indirect expression even when accompanied by pain" (ibid.) In addition to her trinity of themes, Davison also distilled a trinity of crucial Gothic elements: "the castle, the Gothic villain and the persecuted maiden" (56). Once more, as the Gothic villain, Ahab features prominently here as the gateway to the Gothic within *Moby Dick.* The castle has been discussed in greater detail in the previous chapter, which leaves us with the persecuted maiden, obviously none other than Moby Dick, an idea not quite as insane as it seems at first (persecuted femininity), but let's stick to what's safe for now.
When discussing Ahab, Robert D. Hume says the following:

> In the microcosmic world of the whaling ship Ahab is the completely dominant villain-hero. He is a figure of immense stature, a good man, a kindly man of real humanity (witness his relations with Starbuck), but a man gripped by a deadly monomania which will destroy him and his companions with him… Ahab is a madman, and yet he remains a complex and tragic figure. Like Melmoth he willfully persists in his own delusion, yet he succeeds in carrying his crew with him, and the reader follows, irresistibly drawn into a mad and exalted quest. Ahab is a Promethean figure: if the sun insults him, he will strike at it, come what may. (287-8)

In addition to Hume, in *The Gothic,* Punter and Byron also recognize the importance of Melville's protagonists for Gothic readings of his works. They, too, characterize Ahab as a "Promethean over-reacher", furthermore claiming, on the topic of *Billy Budd, Sailor,* that "Problematizing of the basic conflict between good and evil on moral grounds is usually considered Melville's most important contribution to the development of the Gothic tradition." (151)
The idea of the over-reacher in particular carries a special appeal. Such characters that dare to insult God and spit in the face of impossible odds evoke a sort of primal defiance in readers, a simmering Romantic pride. We are invited to sympathize with and admire these characters, even if (or especially because) their hubris brings them down. The act of standing up, of going against the grain and breaking the chains that bind us all – these are the ultimate fantasies – absolute freedom, with no masters above us, no gods and no destiny. This appeal and admiration is what Carlyle referred to as hero-worship. In the introduction to *On Heroes and Hero-Worship*, Traill, another contemporary of Melville's, noted when it comes to heroes that later generations "find these great men's lives reminding them… that they can make their lives sublime" (x). To use Carlyle's terms, Ahab is hero as a king, a leader of men, much like

Napoleon, whose influence on the Romantic movement, on literature and philosophy can hardly be overstated. As an example of the great man, for better or worse, we find traces of him in Beethoven, in Tolstoy and in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment.* Raskolnikov's crime stems from the question whether it's possible for him to "make his life sublime" by adopting a rule of conduct, which is the ultimate conclusion of hero worship. Sadly, 'quod licet Iovi, non licet bovi', we might cynically argue, if we assume that *Crime and Punishment* is a story about a little man and about the impossibility of reconciling great aspirations, a dreamer's mind, the promise of an epoch, unachievable, unattainable ambition with the realistic circumstances of low birth, morbid, torturous, psychologically steeped dream-states, carnal limitations, constraints of an overbearing social and material environment, as well as constricting specificity of one's deep-rootedness within a delineated world. We could say that the novel is about the impossibility of Romanticism as an idea and about the impracticality of heroism and hero worship in the face of Realism and the cold, harsh realities of everyday lives. From a certain perspective, the conclusion of the novel is just as fatalistic and hopeless as the tragic ending of *Moby Dick*. If it were a Romantic novel, Raskolnikov's conformist acceptance of God and society would make it a tragedy to a much greater degree than his failure in becoming heroic and exalted.

But what about Ahab? Throughout the novel, we encounter several hints and references that mention Napoleon either by name or through inference. In being king-like or regal-like, Ahab succeeds in fulfilling this Romantic ideal, something that Raskolnikov can only dream of. However, this may be altogether even more dangerous, as illustrated by Willie T. Weathers: "In picturing the catastrophe wrought by a captain who aspired to godhood, Melville indicates a deep concern with the problem of political leadership, but fear of the Romantic concept of the hero, the God-man guided by his divine intuition." (477) By approaching the novel with the political and social context in mind, Weathers argues that *Moby Dick* can be read as an attack on Romantic idealism, its notion and perspective on literature, heroism, individualism and humanity as a whole. While *Crime and Punishment*, if we can push this string of Carlyle's terms any further, can be approached as a systematic deconstruction of the folly of hero worship, *Moby Dick* then represents an attack on the very notion of the hero and leadership as such, as we can read in that pivotal chapter, "The Funeral": "silly sheep leap over a vacuum, because their leader originally leaped there when a stick was held. There's your law of precedents; there's your utility of traditions; there's the story of your obstinate survival of old beliefs never bottomed on the earth, and now not even hovering in the air! There's orthodoxy!" (248)

"Romantic", "Promethean", "over-reacher": words we encounter over and over again when it comes to Ahab. When talking about over-reachers, isn't it embedded in the very notion of heroism to over-reach? What of Icarus, Faustus, Frankenstein? What is the point of the hero unless he embarks on dangerous and impossible pursuits, like Gilgamesh searching for eternal life? If the quests are common, everyday and easily achievable, then we are all heroes, which indeed is the point of view of Christianity, where saints rate higher than warriors and questers. Within the literary tradition, over-reaching could also be seen as another Romantic aspect of the Gothic hero-villain, as explained by Crow: "This awareness of living in a flawed world, while tantalized by a perfect one just beyond our outstretched fingers, is the source of what is called 'Romantic agony', which, in turn, can be seen as one impetus behind the Gothic." (8) The peculiarity of the Gothic villain-hero, as opposed to the Romantic hero, is that he does not simply accept the misery and pain. Both types of heroes are aware of the tantalizing perfect world or the higher ideal, however, in the Gothic villain hero, the agony causes rage and overwhelming darkness: "A creature of powerful intellect, suffering this Romantic agony, could be driven to misguided, cruel deeds, trying to set the world right, or to avenge a sense of outrage or betrayal. Thus arose the Gothic villain-hero." (Crow 9) This idea that the Gothic villain-hero is, in essence, the Romantic hero cornered and driven to excess, is also supported by Botting: "The darker, agonized aspect of Romantic writing has heroes in the Gothic mould: gloomy, isolated and sovereign, they are wanderers, outcasts and rebels, condemned to roam the borders of social worlds, bearers of a dark truth or horrible knowledge" (*Gothic* 98) The isolationism and individualism of these villain-heroes is what makes them particularly interesting when it comes to the idea of America. Newton Arvin argues that Ahab "is modern man, and particularly American man, in his role as 'free' and 'independent' Individual, as self-sustaining and self-assertive Ego" (176). However, as indicated by Irving Malin, there's a thin line between individuality and narcissism. In his reading of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance,* Malin recognizes Hollingsworth's "immense, monstruous self-love" (7) as the source of his monomania, which turns him into a monstrosity, or makes him abhuman. With Ahab's first appearance, when Ishmael compares him to a charred corpse, also noting his unusual mark, we are presented with a chilling physical description, typical for the Gothic. In Kelly Hurley's words, "these texts describe human bodies that have lost their claim to a discrete and integral identity, a fully human existence… The abhuman being remains vestiges of its human identity, but has become, or is in the process of becoming, some half-human other" (190). The abhumanness of Ahab is evidenced not only in his appearance, but also in his conduct and his mysterious power to persuade and to frighten. Nevertheless, in whatever

way it may present itself, the very idea of something that is beyond human, or only barely human evokes that same feeling of the uncanny valley that humanoid robots bring out, constituting, according to Hurley, "another kind of threat to the integrity of human identity." (ibid.) In *Benito Cereno*, as previously mentioned, Cereno warns against the inhumanity of forgetting one's past and turning over a new leaf: "Because they have no memory,' he dejectedly replied; 'because they are not human." (103) And while the ghostliness of the sea is constantly brought up in *Moby Dick* as the flipside of its uncaring forgetfulness, the abhumanness of Ahab stems from his relentless, self-absorbed obsession. Malin notes that "Ahab views the environment narcissistically as a mirror of his own need, and dream, to impose his will without discrimination." (7) If we should dare to propose a critical view of American foreign policy, we may recognize a correlation here, and in it the danger that lies in adopting individuality, or the previously tentatively introduced principle of the self, as the defining or founding principle of a nation. Narcissism, the celebration of individuality, of the self-made man, of Ford, of Jobs, of Zuckerberg, of Gates, of Washington and Teddy Roosevelt, of Elon Musk - it is central to the American experience. In America, hero worship is very much alive - in Rambo who single-handedly overpowers hundreds of men, as much as in the idea of entrepreneurship and risk-taking. The ideal American is someone who invested everything he had, all of his material, mental and physical assets in pursuit of his goal, one who was willing to risk it all, against the 'better judgment' of his friends and family, mere sheep who didn't have the vision, the guts, the know-how. And in spite of it all, he comes out on top. However, there is one crucial difference. In *Moby Dick*, Ahab doesn't come out on top. In the modern hero-worship of America, the ones who succeed are celebrated, while the millions who fail are forgotten. In a way, *Moby Dick*, and by extension the Gothic, serve as a warning, as a reminder of the inherent fallacy and inevitable failure of ambition and self-love. While introducing his elaborate discussion on narcissism, Lasch says, "Fromm uses the term as a synonym for the asocial individualism which… undermines cooperation, brotherly love and the search for wider loyalties." (31)

While talking about antagonistic heroes of the epic similar to Ahab, Bloom also mentioned "Hart Crane the Pilgrim, making his song one Bridge of Fire in defiance of America's failure to fulfill the prophecies of Walt Whitman." (Bloom, xiv) We can easily claim that the Gothic follows this tradition and, like a defiant hero-villain points out America's failure. However, on the other hand, we may also say that America itself is a stubborn hero-villain, defiantly pursuing its dream, just like Ahab is pursuing Moby Dick. Although it may seem that such

deductions reduce everything to absurdity, I believe that they point to the universality of Melville's vision when it comes to portraying the reality of human pursuits.

Concluding remarks

In this thesis I have tried to present a Gothic reading of *Moby Dick* and a Gothic overview of Captain Ahab. There are some authors who would object to this use of the term 'Gothic', for example Killeen, who warns of "devaluation of the term Gothic in studies of the form" and offers a definition of the Gothic as "highly-stylized mystery-tales, using a limited set of plots, settings and character-types, and including an element of history" (2).
I have adopted a broader understanding of the Gothic, however, in line with Crow's understanding, "as a tradition of oppositional literature" (2). It is important to recognize that the Gothic is much more complex and way broader than a single hero-villain scheme I have explored here. I haven't even touched upon the female gothic, for example, or the possible repercussions of the monk as a hero. These omissions stemmed from various practical reasons, as well as the fact that, when attempting a Gothic reading of *Moby Dick*, dealing with Ahab first and foremost proved itself to be the most logical approach. Firstly, there's the insistent building of suspense around him, the subtle hints of supernatural agency and the air of mystery. Secondly, we have the exploration of authority, of individual and society and of reclusiveness, solitude and isolation. But, most importantly, the central emptiness, the nothingness which looms behind the veil can only come to the fore through him and his pursuit. Within the novel, he is the "bearer of a dark truth or horrible knowledge" (Botting 98), which he slowly divulges through his monologues and repeated clashes, whether with his subordinates or Moby Dick. This exploration of the true nature of the world does not exist without him. And while Ahab being the hero-villain is perhaps the one element of *Moby Dick* which brings it closest to the Gothic, it is also the one element which frees the novel from its gloomy defeatism. His villainy, while introduced through Gothic conventions, is the only thing that resists the true darkness of higher truths the novel uncovers. No matter what happens, Ahab stays true. "Towards thee I roll, thou all-destroying, but unconquering whale"

(426), he taunts Moby Dick, and, though destroyed, he remains unconquered. It is a celebration not only of individuality (or narcissism), but also of human dignity. It is the one redeeming glimmer of light amidst the uncaring sea of life and, in reality, the only thing we have. “I now know thee, thou clear spirit, and I now know that thy right worship is defiance.” (382), cries Ahab, “I own thy speechless, placeless power; but to the last gasp of my earthquake life will dispute its unconditional, unintegral mastery in me.” (ibid.)
This integrity, this defiance is still very present in our consciousness and in popular culture: in Bruce Lee when he says “Don't fear failure. — Not failure, but low aim, is the crime. In great attempts it is glorious even to fail.” (from *Striking Thoughts*), in Marvel’s *The Avengers* when Stark says “Because if we can't protect the Earth, you can be damned well sure we'll avenge it!”, and in the famous image of a single man stepping in front a convoy of tanks on Tiananmen Square. Whether it’s delusion or a certain nobility innate to humanity, we all feel this defiance at one point or another during our lives; it may very well be the only thing that drives people to get up in the morning. In the end, Ahab cries, “Ho, ho! from all your furthest bounds, pour ye now in, ye bold billows of my whole foregone life, and top this one piled comber of my death!” (426) If there is such a thing as universal humanity or the human condition, then the words “my whole foregone life” are definitely its epitome and its bottom-line.

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